

Panther Science Fiction

M. JOHN HARRISON THE MACHINE IN SHAFT TEN



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M. John Harrison

The Machine in Shaft Ten

and other stories

Panther

For Diane, with love.

ONE

The Machine in Shaft Ten

Although I was later to become intimately involved with Professor Nicholas Bruton and the final, fatal events at the base of Shaft Ten, I was prevented by a series of personal disasters from taking much interest in the original announcement of his curious discovery at the centre of the earth. A copy of *National Geographic* containing the professor's immaculate geological proof of the presence of an 'emotion converter' buried at the core of our planet lay unread on my desk for a month; and, I am ashamed to say, the international scientific uproar precipitated in the early weeks of 197- by the sinking of the 'B' series of exploratory shafts passed me by. One is morally entitled, I believe, to some life of one's own, even to the detriment of one's public self.

I did, however, hear the end of a broadcast talk given by the professor, soon after the appearance of the *National Geographic* article, to an audience made up of interested

parties from the English scientific community. I feel that 'interested' may not be the best word to use in this context: their behaviour was undignified, and made listening rather difficult. Despite that, I found myself fascinated by his conclusions.

'Thus, gentlemen,' he said, 'I can see no alternative to a radical readjustment of Man's view of himself and his universe.

'I have shown - beyond doubt, I believe - that our emotions, subsequent to their processing at the core of the earth, are converted to an essentially radiological energy and projected into space, in the direction of the sun.

'We have no descriptive systems capable of dealing with whatever changes they effect there. We must, however, as my recently published work shows, view this as an artificial process; and, more important, *a process of very long standing indeed.*

'Gentlemen, we have no option but to assume that the joys and miseries of Man are fuel for some gigantic cosmic machine; that, since our evolution as an emotion-bearing species, we have been *used*; that our most public triumphs and our most sordid personal tragedies may be the oil that runs the galactic bakery van,

'How does it feel, gentlemen, to be a resource?'

My resignation from the Cabinet had only recently come into effect: finding it difficult to shake off old habits, I wondered how my ex-colleagues would react to the news (Fairbairn took the government to the country, and was promptly thrown out on his ear). Beyond that, I was unconcerned by the machine at the centre of the earth until I received, in the July of that year, a visit from the professor himself.

By then, of course, his work had been verified, and his credibility as an investigator completely restored.

Social and religious hysteria was at a peak: fifty new administrations and a hundred novel creeds had sprung up during the week following Shaft Ten's attainment of 'machine-zero' (perhaps the most amazing feature of this whole affair was the speed at which a successful shaft was sunk). The few rational observers who remained in the world were left to reflect cynically that, even when convinced of the true purpose of his ideological conflicts - 'emotion sumps' in the growing terminology of the machine - man could find no more original method of expressing himself than to multiply them.

Several small wars, dormant for some time, rampages over South East Asia and the Middle East with refreshed ferocity. I feared privately that the emotion converter would suffer an overload of faith and patriotism, triggering some immense metaphysical catastrophe as its capacitors exhausted themselves into the surrounding magma.

A change had come about in the professor's attitude to his discovery: he was no longer interested in pure science, he explained as I ushered him into the study of my summer home at Lympne, but in something he called 'action'.

I remember very few of the impressions I received at that first meeting; they are obscured by later images of him, clothed and equipped for his descent of Shaft Ten. I can recall being almost repelled by his physiology. He was a peculiarly smash man with an immense, sad head (I believe that, earlier in his career, he had written a paper which offered new light on the physical characteristics of Darwin, da Vinci, and Socrates - all three were, it seems, less than five feet tall) and his features were birdlike to an exaggerated degree, too well defined for the comfort of his friends, and a gift to his enemies.

'Frankly,' he said, 'I've come to you for finance.' I found this surprising. I had imagined that in his present commanding situation he would have access to considerable finances as soon as he decided on a line of research he felt worthwhile.

‘There are,’ he told me, ‘more important things than research.’ He looked down at his tiny blunt hands for a moment. ‘We didn’t deserve this, Lutkin,’ he said. ‘Any of us.’ He seemed to be uncomfortable with the sentiment. ‘There is a way to it, though, you know,’ he went on, quite defiantly. ‘I’m sure *you* don’t like living with that thing down there, any more than I do.’

He was making a transition common in that decade: the fumbling shift from concern for abstracts to a more active involvement with the results of his work. When he refused to tell me the nature of the scheme he wished me to support, I politely but firmly refused to commit myself. But the vanity of the failed public figure, the half-conscious realization that if I helped him I would retrieve my position as a substantial contributor to the mainstream of events, weakened my rejection severely.

Two days later, he called again, and left with my promise of limited support (ceiling to be decided by myself), in exchange for an assurance that I would accompany him on any expedition to the centre of the earth.

At the end of July my personal affairs adjusted themselves most equably, and, my time being once more my own, I studied the news media daily. The professor had dropped sharply out of the public gaze, and I learned very little of him beyond that he had shut himself away somewhere in Cumberland, and refused to make comment even on the wealth of material being generated by the investigatory teams at the base of Shaft Ten. Extant newsreel films of his retreat in Honister Pass show a square stone cottage set among sombre, desolate hills.

Most of the news through August and the beginning of September was of a steady social and moral adjustment which can perhaps best be described in the decline of the authoritative religions. A complex front of Druidic and neo-Mayan cults swept out of centres as widely dissimilar as

Peach Valley, California and St. Anne's, England: all had basically apocalyptic premises and a solar orientation. But the religion of the decade began in Chile, when a minor nihilist and political agitator named Estanislao persuaded two thousand people to drown themselves in the Pacific Ocean.

The Roman Catholic Church was the major casualty of this period. Estanislao's queer religion of despair spread across Latin America, and, later the world: Pope Pius declared him the Antichrist, and was assassinated by a sensible Bolivian while blessing a crowd in Lima, Peru. Massive, silent mobs gathered to hear Estanislao, and his disciple announce that since man was incapable of independent action and decision-making all that was left to him was to choose the manner of his own death as unemotionally as possible, thus depriving the machine of its raw materials.

As I have said, I saw nothing of the professor, but in October he began to draw regularly on the Lloyds account I had opened in his names, and he continued to make his presence felt in this manner until late December. I received one letter from him, hastily-written in a somewhat stilted tone. He was worried, he informed me, that local hysteria would prematurely end his preparations: bands of armed agricultural workers were active in the area of Keswick, destroying machinery and isolated houses; would I therefore authorize his purchase of a quantity of small arms, so that his staff might protect themselves?

'D' notices, and a heavy security blanket then in effect, prevented any public report of such guerrilla activity. I was not anxious to subscribe to any programme of violence, and asked Bruton if he could not finish his work in the south. There was a space of some days before he replied by telephone. I noticed immediately an alteration in the character of his voice, a side-product, I assumed, of his successfully completing the transition I have mentioned

above. He was adamant in his demand for the weapons, and I was duly presented with an invoice from a well-known private arms dealer. I felt nervous, but resigned.

In January, almost a year after the discovery of the machine, I received a cryptic telegram dispatched from Keswick. Two days later I was in train for Retford in Nottinghamshire, and the head of Shaft Ten.

The 'B' series of shafts had created their own microclimate, a result of the volcanic failure of Shafts Four through Six. Consequently, most of the country lacked the blanket of January snow that covered the rest of the Midlands, and over its flat, once-productive beet-fields hung a warm, oppressive mist. A small Vesuvian cone reared up from the site of the teacher-training disaster at Eaton, East Retford. Classic basalt formations had inundated the colliery town of Worksop. Immense long-chain protein molecules had been observed forming in the heated pools of waste chemicals discharged by the shaft projects among the suburban lava flows of Retford.

Breton telephoned soon after I had booked into my hotel. He limited himself to rather brusque directions for finding Shaft Ten and instructions as to the type of clothing I should wear: when I pressed him for further information, he resorted to obscurity. That was at approximately ten o'clock in the evening; it seemed rather strange to me that we were to begin the descent almost at once. I ate a light meal, and, to quell my growing nervousness about the coming incredible journey into the underworld, decided to walk to the head of the shaft.

Faint volcanic flares lit the Ordsall Road as I went, and through breaks in the mist I could see electrical will-of-the-wisps dancing round the summit of the Eaton cone. The service buildings for the shaft were located on the corpse of Ordsall Wood; a few remaining bitter trees were outlined against the massive pre-cast concrete sheds that housed the

shaft-refrigeration turbines. In the darkness the ground vibrated palpably, subsonics from the deeper levels of the shaft itself trembled in my bones.

I stood beyond the arc-lights that surrounded the checkpoint gates, sweating in the heat of the nearest extractor-outlet, amazed by Man's ability to construct such enormous extensions of himself despite the tyranny of his most basic psychological processes. Had we not been bred specifically as a power source for the emotion converter, what might we have accomplished? Two large Land Rovers drew up behind me and disgorged the professor and his staff.

At our first meeting, the watery-eyed scientist in Bruton's skull had been retreating under pressure from other elements of the man's personality: now he had vanished completely, and the tiny figure standing before me, dressed in a closely-fitting black overall, was composed, self-assured and powerful. The disproportion of his big, avian head no longer invited caricature – it was still desperately ugly, but a tremendous change had occurred behind his eyes. He was carrying a light shoulder pack, across which was strapped one of the machine pistols he had ordered in December.

I was dismayed. 'Look here, Bruton,' I said, 'you don't need that thing.' A glance at the dozen or so men who lounged on the vehicles behind him confirmed that they were similarly armed.

'I'm sorry, Lutkin' he said, 'but things aren't quite what you've taken them to be. I should have explained. There never were any Luddites in Keswick. At least, not while I was there. I'm sorry. It was an unpardonable deception-' Here, he shook his head apologetically and I noticed that he was in need of a barber '- but the only chance I had to get the stuff. No Grants Committee would have considered it; that's why I had to have you.'

'You must do without me from now on, professor,' I said. I was sick with anger. I turned my back on him and made to

walk off in the direction of the town. He put a surprisingly powerful hand on my arm.

‘I can’t allow you to do that. Look, Lutkin, I told you that there was a way to stop the ting, and there is: but did you seriously expect that I would be permitted to just go down and turn it off?’

Abruptly, I realized that he was correct. Millions of man-hours of international co-operation had gone into the sinking of the shafts. More important, the shaft-projects were the sole still-centre in a political chaos: without them, the tenuous unity achieved for the first time ever by the major powers would evaporate. Sensing an advantage, he went on:

‘And we deserve this change, Lutkin. We deserve the opportunity to make our first gesture of independence since the Pliocene, to become self-determining at least as far as the limits that were originally built into us. Cornelius is right: that thing down there is bloody *insufferable*.

‘We can’t let it go on leaching.’ A curious pause. Then: ‘Whatever the repercussions.’

It was that peculiar choice of expression – with its Miltonic implications of cosmic rebellion – that convinced me then, and which haunts me now.

Bruton looked across at the head of Shaft Ten, and when he spoke again there was such a wealth of bitterness and despair in his voice that I hated to imagine what sort of dreams he had lived with since his discovery of the nature of the machine. However accidentally, he had impelled the human race to confront its own clownlike glorification of its metaphysical inferiority – and I think he felt the resultant terrifying sense of impotent rage more than anybody.

‘With any luck,’ he said, ‘when we have finished here, Man will have no place or purpose at all. We’ve lived too long with them. We deserve the dignity of pointlessness.’

You will have seen the videotapes of our assault on the main gates, made automatically by the closed-circuit security

system and retrieved later, at great personal risk, by Colonel C.R.S. Marsden of the Sherwood Foresters. Nothing would be accomplished by my adding to that record, although I would like to say that the so-called 'atrocities' Thompson and Frost claim to have detected on the poor-quality tapes from Camera Five simply did not take place. This is a deliberate slur on the professor's memory. We lost five men – not two, as Frost has suggested recently – and left the remaining ten to hold the head of the shaft open for our retreat.

'The odd thing,' Bruton said, as he operated the mechanisms of the elevator and the pressure doors of the cage sealed themselves behind us, 'is that I could have got in quite easily on my own. I'm well-respected here, you see. But they wouldn't have let this in without an inspection.' He had brought with him a heavy wooden crate, some three feet long by two square, and now tapped it significantly. 'I could have got in quite easily without it.' There was a tone of irony in his voice which repelled me even though it did not stem from any callous trait of his. I stared at his parrot-like, powder-burned face for seconds, and he looked away. The descent was uneventful and, apart from Bruton's terse advice on the proper use of the various instruments of personal comfort installed in the life-cage, carried out in silence – if the vast humming and hissing of the shaft refrigeration can be termed 'silence'. The atmosphere of the cage rapidly became hot and stifling. I found myself swallowing almost constantly to relieve the unpleasant sensation in my ears. None of the awe I had previously felt towards Shaft Ten survived that journey. I don't know what I had expected: echoing fallopian tunnels recalling to my genetic memory the similar pre-womb excursion, perhaps – or simply some sight of the magma that boiled and roared around the shaft – some sense, anyway, that this was a forbidding Plutonian descent, carried out at great and immediately-visible risk.

The reason for the professor's peculiar timing of the raid became apparent when we reached the complex of interconnecting vaults and passages that honeycombed the magma around the emotion converter, and found them deserted. Machine-zero was a high, cathedral vault, its organic-plastic walls constructed to resonate in sympathy with the shifting phases of the machine's cycle. Into this shivering, gently-lit space we lugged Bruton's box.

I had planned at this point in the narrative to introduce some illustrations of the more salient and enigmatic portions of the machine, but I find I am unable to obtain copyright. Most of you will have to hand, however, at least one of the many colourful diagrams of the mapped areas that have appeared in the Sunday supplements. I find the *Sunday Times* photographic essay the most comprehensive accurate of these.

From machine-zero, the professor and I moved to the area usually labeled 'induction chamber' (Frost persists in using the obsolete Plattner notation 'primary capacitor': the area was later proved, of course, not to be a capacitor of any kind). By leaving it though Subsidiary Fornices 6 & 7, we avoided the little-understood lobes of material that choked the main archway. Achieving Access Point Three, we dragged our burden into the major staging vault which surrounded the heart of the machine. To find oneself standing a mere eighty feet (a higher figure may be given in some diagrams) from the exact geometrical centre of the earth is an exhilarating experience.

The soft fluctuating light that filled the vault lent the organic surfaces of the machine a delicate pastel tint, and reflected dully from the huge grapelike extrusions that had made their appearance on its walls after the sinking of Shaft Ten – so that the whole thing resembled a giant, alien fruit, ripe, but marred by parasitic organisms. In operation, the converter generated a constant musical chord, six separate vibrations on two notes comprising a 'modal' E. For a

moment I stood, exultant yet tranquillized, feeling for the first time the mystical thrill I had expected of my journey.

But Bruton was inured to the effects of the machine. As soon as his box was put down, he prised open its lid, and from it took several small grey blocks of a waxy substance, apparently *plastique*; various pieces of detonating apparatus; and a woodcutter's axe with a long curved wooden shaft. 'You can do nothing here, Lutkin,' he told me. 'You might be more useful up on the surface.' 'Allow me to stay until you go up,' I said, hurt that I had been used as nothing more than a pack-animal. He shrugged, took a firm grip on the axe and began to swing it against a spot on the machine that had been at some pains to locate. I could see no difference between it and the surrounding areas.

He had soon cut a sizeable hole in the 'rind' of the converter, and about a pound and a half of rose-tinted, fleshy substance, dry and firm like the meat of a mushroom, lay on the floor of the chamber. Quickly, he packed explosive into the cavity, wired it up, and moved to another spot about five yards away to repeat the procedure. I experienced a peculiar, dreamlike curiosity as he worked, and about the central vault, relaxed by its rosy hues. By the time he had finished mining at equal intervals around the circumference of the machine, I was deep in an examination of the tumours I have noted above, fascinated by the veinlike structures of a pale gold that lay just beneath its surface. I heard a sharp metallic *click* behind me, and turned to find Bruton pressing a full magazine into his machine-pistol.

'Thanks for your help, Lutkin,' he said. 'It's time you went.' I looked at the gun.

'Aren't you coming?' I asked foolishly.

He shook his head.

'But you'll be killed when it-'

He interrupted with a jerk of the machine-pistol barrel.

'You must get up there and tell them they have precisely fifty minutes to get clear of the head of the shaft and begin evacuation of the town. I have allowed a small margin of error, but it would not be wise to let them that.

'There will be a good deal of vulcanism.

'Tell whoever is in charge up there now that if you or any of my staff who are still alive are injured, or if they send anyone down the shaft, I will simply bypass the time-fuse and detonate the stuff at once.'

'Why are you doing this?' I said.

I could not understand him at the time. I left him under the threat of the gun (I cannot say whether he really intended to shoot me if I refused to leave him), but not because of it, and he knew that. By the time I had reached the access-point of the chamber, he had put it down and lost all interest in it.

'Professor!' I called. 'Don't be silly!' He pretended not to hear.

My last glimpse of him was a tiny, madly-whirling figure swinging the axe again and again into the flesh of the emotion converter. His long white hair was damp with sweat, and on his pitiful, ugly face was an expression of what I can only describe as methodical ferocity. I could see no reason for that action. I realize now that he hated the machine, which seems paradoxical.

The events that followed my return to the surface are public knowledge.

The professor's prediction of volcanic disturbances was more than borne out. But thanks to the untiring efforts of Colonel Marsden – who had arrived with the Foresters shortly after our attack on the gates – we got out of the Shaft ten buildings in advance of the *plastique* explosion and managed to move half the inhabitants of Retford before the greater explosion of the machine itself drowned the town under a lake of lava. For many days, Shaft Ten flung thousands of megatons of magma into the air every hour,

and the crash evacuation of what is now the Nottingham Lava Plain was only partially successful.

My present position of trust came about largely as the result of a mistake on the part of Colonel Marsden. He was quite uninterested in politics, devoted to his career, and had forgotten I no longer had a place in the House. My appearance at the head of Shaft Ten led him to think that I had been engaged in some official attempt to dissuade the professor from his anarchic attack on the machine.

'Negotiation never works with buggers like that, sir' he said to me. I see no point in hiding the true reason for my presence there: the massive public support for the professor's act of defiance that has risen in the last year leads me to believe that the electorate will regard my honest admission with sympathy.

The human race is now, as the professor wished, entirely devoid of purpose. Recruitments to Estanislao's faith have fallen off recently, which seems to suggest that survivors of his 'global suicide' programme – partly-realized during the hysteria which swept the world soon after the Retford eruption – are aware of the self-contradiction implicit in its creed. An ideology of despair is as emotional as any other.

Lately, I discover myself giving more and more attention to Bruton's words at the head of Shaft Ten. I envisage the entire nation, indeed, the entire human race, waiting unrepentant for whatever reprisals the builders of the machine may initiate. We have no meaning – and thus, thankfully, no more illusions – left to lose.

TWO

The Lamia and Lord Cromis

1

Lord tegus-Cromis, sometime soldier and sophisticate of Viriconium, the Pastel City, who imagined himself to be a better poet than swordsman, sat at evening in the long, smoky parlour of the Blue Metal Discovery, chief in of Duirinish. Those among his fellow-customers who knew something of travelling – and there were not too many of them – regarded him with a certain respect, for it was rumoured that he had lately arrived from the capital, coming by the high paths through Monar, to Mam Sodhail and the High Leedale, which was no mean achievement. Winter comes early to the hills about Duirinish, and hard.

They watched him circumspectly. For himself, tegus-Cromis found no similar interest in them, but sat with a jug of wine by his slim white left hand, listening to the north wind drive

sleet across the bleak cobbles of Replica Square and against the bottle-glass windows of the inn.

He was a tall man, thin and cadaverous. He had slept little during his journey, and his green eyes were tired in the dark hollows above his high and prominent cheekbones.

He wore a heavy cloak of bice velvet, a tabard of antique leather set with iridium studs; tight mazarine velvet breeches; and calf-length boots of pale blue suede. The hand that curled round the jug of wine was weighted, according to the custom of the time, with bulky rings of non-ferrous metals intagliated with involved ciphers and sphenograms. Beneath his cloak, the other rested on the pommel of his plain long-sword, which, contrary to the custom of the times, had no name.

Occupied by his wine, and by consideration of the purposes which had brought him here at such a cold time, he was not disposed to talk: a circumstance of the local clientele – in the main fat merchants of the fur-and-metal trade, nouveau riche and pretentious – were loath to accept. They had twice invited him to sit with them around the massive roaring fireplace, eager to capture even so minor a lord. But he preferred to huddle in his cloak on the periphery of the room in shadow. They left him to himself after the second refusal, whispering that the evening was chilly enough without his morose, ascetic features and his cold courtesy.

He was amused by their reaction. He ate a light meal, and afterwards took a measure of good cocaine from a small box of chased pewter, sniffing it carefully up, his smile faint and withdrawn. Evening wore into night, and he did not move. He was waiting for someone, but not for the woman in the hooded purple cloak who came in accompanied only by a gust of wind and a flurry of sleet, at midnight.

He raised his heavy eyelids and watched her in.

She threw back her hood; her hair spilled down; long and roan, it blew about her delicate triangular face in the draught from the closing door. Her eyes were violet, flecked

with colours he found difficult to name, depthless. There were no rings on her fingers, and her cloak was fastened by a copper clasp of complex design.

It was plain that the merchants knew her, but their welcome was stiff, a concerted multiplication of double chins, a brief collective nod; and for a moment a slight but discernible of embarrassment hung in the thick air about the fire. She paid them little notice, and they seemed thankful. Her cloak whispered past them, and she whispered to the inn-keeper, who, red-faced and perspiring had thrust his flabby shoulders through the hatch that connected the parlour to his devils' kitchen.

When this exchange was done, and the serving hatch closed, she turned her attention to Cromis, slumped and still smiling faintly in his splendid cloak.

It was a strange look she gave him. In her queer eyes habitual curiosity and blank indifference both, conflicting - as if she had lived many lives and metempsychoses under the Name Stars, seen the universal cycle through and again, but continued wearily about the surface of the world, waiting to be surprised by something. It was a strange look. Cromis met it openly, and was puzzled.

She came over to his table.

'Lady,' he said, 'I would stand, but-'

He indicated his little snuffbox, open on the table top. He saw that the clasp of her cloak was formed to represent mating dragonflies, or perhaps complicated religious operating-symbols for ecstasy.

She nodded and smiled, her eyes unchanging.

'You are Lord tegus-Cromis,' she said. Her voice was unexpected, a rough, vibrant burr, an accent he could not place.

He raised his eyebrows. 'The landlord?' he asked. She did not answer. 'You flatter me by your attention,' he said.

He poured her some wine.

'You have a scant reception from our good traders.'

She took the cup and drank.

'All have made bids,' she said, 'as is their nature – to regard people as bales of fur, or ingots. (How do you regard people, lord?) Each has no wish that his friends discover that his bids were too low. Each therefore avoids me when in company of the others.'

Cromis laughed. The merchants pricked up their ears. But since she did not laugh with him, but repeated the question he did not wish to answer, he changed the subject.

Later, he found that a great length of time had passed most pleasantly. He was puzzled with her yet, and wondered why she had picked him out. But he loved such company and loathed discourtesy, so he did not question her directly. The fire had died, the merchants had returned to their houses, the taverner hovered behind his hatch, amiable and yawning.

Suddenly she said to him:

'Lord Cromis, you are here to hunt.'

And, indeed, he was. He inclined his head.

'Do not.'

'But, lady-'

The *baan* has brought doom to many, and will make no exception of yourself. Plainly, we have one of the Eight Beasts among us. Since it has chosen Duirinish for this incarnation, Duirinish must bear the brunt.

'I have no desire to see you brought maimed and destroyed from the Marsh, sir-'

At this, he showed his teeth, and fondled the hilt of the nameless sword, and laughed loudly enough to disturb the inn-keeper's light sleep.

'My lord,' she said. 'If I presume?'

He shook his head.

'Please, that was churlish of me. Your anxiety – let me dispel it – two companions hunt with me. Of one –' Here, he said a name – you will have heard. I thought so. We will lay your Beast.'

And, remembering the personal fate he might or might not be heir to:

‘Besides, there are reasons as to why I should meet this *baan*, if it is the one I suppose it to be.’

He stood up. He was much taken with her, and her mysterious concern. He said with the politeness of his times: ‘Lady, I have a comfortable room above. It is late. Should you so wish, we could go there.’ And, having taken her arm. He asked, ‘Perhaps you would tell me your name?’

In the morning, he woke to an altercation in the yard below his windows, and found her gone from his bed. Smoothing back the heavy greying hair that had escaped its suede fillet while he slept, he crossed the chilly oak floor and opened the shutters. A pale, post-dawn light filtered into the room, softening for a brief time his features, which remained bleak despite the pleasures of the night.

Down in the yard, the unpredictable weather of early winter had abandoned sleet and now offered frost instead, riming it thick on the cobbles and the half-doors of the stables, stiffening their hinges, bleaching the breath of the horses. The air had a metallic smell, a faint bitter taste, a thin echo of the stink of the Marsh.

Several shouting, gesticulating figures were gathered about the two tired, laden packhorses and a fine blood mare almost nineteen hands high. Cromis could gain no clue as to the precise nature of the melee, but the mare was plunging, striking out, and he saw that two of the figures were clad in the bright, clashing colours of fashionable Viriconium.

He closed the shutters gently, nodding to himself. Ignoring the subtle invitation of the pewter snuffbox – his habitual ennui having given way to a suppressed elation – he dressed quickly. He had this mannerism: as he went quietly down to the parlour to meet his visitors, his left hand had strayed out unknown to him and caressed the black hilt of the sword that had been his doomed father’s.

But his hands were still when Dissolution Kahn and Rotgob the dwarf, a mismatched enough couple, presented themselves at the parlour door, arguing over the stabling fees.

‘But we *agreed* to share the expense-’ this in a powerful but injured tone.

‘Ha. I was drunk. And besides-’ with a reedy snigger ‘-I am a liar as well as a dwarf.’

The Kahn was a massive man, heavy in the shoulder and heavier in the hip, with long sparse yellow hair that curled anarchically about his jowled and bearded features. His astonishing orange breeches were tucked into oxblood boots, his violet shirt had slashed and scalloped sleeves. A floppy-brimmed hat of dark brown felt, too small for his head, gave his face a sly and rustic caste.

‘Every wench in the city knows *that*,’ he said, with dignity.

‘Oh, hello, Cromis. You see: I found the little brute and brought him.’

Rotgob, leaning on the doorpost beside the giant, greasy brown hair framing a blemished, ratlike face, was clad all in scarlet, his padded doublet amplifying the disproportion of barrel chest and twisted, skinny legs. He sniggered. His teeth were revolting.

‘Who found who, stupid? Who bailed you out, eh? Pig!’

Limping grotesquely, he scuttled over to Cromis’s breakfast table. ‘I did!’ He ate a bread roll. ‘It was a molestation charge again, Cromis. Next time they’ll have his knackers off. We came as soon as we could.’ He rapped the table, and did a little gleeful dance.

Cromis felt his lips break into a smile. ‘Sit down and eat, please do,’ he invited, wishing he might overcome his nature and greet his curious friends with less reserve.

‘Is it discovered, then?’ asked the dwarf after they had finished, picking crumbs out of his moustache.

Cromis shook his head. ‘But I have heard rumours that it is once of the Eight. It has struck five times, up near Alves in

the centre of the city. They are much afraid of it here. I hope that it is the one I seek.'

'They are cowards, merchants,' said Dissolution Kahn.

'They are ordinary people, and cannot be held culpable for their fear-'

('Or anything else,' interrupted the dwarf. He giggled.)

'You will feel fear before we are finished, Kahn. You know that.'

'Aye, perhaps. If it is that one I may-'

'The Sixth Beast of Viriconium, ' mused Rotgob. 'Oh, you'll wet your drawers all right.' Then: 'It will be lairing in the Marsh. When do we start?'

'We must wait until it strikes again. I will have it put about that I am of the Sixth House, and then they will call me immediately.' He laughed. 'They will be glad to.'

From a greatly ornamental sheath, Rotgob took a thing halfway between a extremely long stiletto and and a rather short rapier, and leering, began to whet it. It was as famous as his name and his unlovable reputation.

'Then one more poor sod must die before we take the animal. That's a pity.'

Looking at the little assassin, Cromis reflected that although gentler creatures lived, they had, on the whole, less character.

'I hope they're taking decent care of my mare,' said Kahn.

'She's a bit of a handful.' A draught blew the smell of the Marsh strongly about the room. 'No stink nastier,' he observed, 'and it upsets her.'

2

Lord tegus-Cromis spent the days that followed with the woman in the purple cloak, and he came to know her no better.

Once, they walked the spiral ascending streets near Alves, and stood on the walls of the city to catch glimpses through the rain of the Marsh in the east and the sea in the west; up there, she asked him why he wished so much to die, but, not having admitted it to himself before that moment, he could give no answer

Once, he told her the following poem, which he had composed in the Great Rust Desert, during winter, chanting it to the accompaniment of a peculiar eastern instrument in a darkened room:

Rust in our eyes ... metallic perspectives trammel us in the rare earth north ... We are nothing but eroded men ... wind clothing our eyes with white ice .. We are the swarf-eaters ... hardened by our addiction, tasting acids ... Little to dream here, our fantasies are iron and icy echoes of bone .. Rust in our eyes, we who had once soft faces.

Once, she said to him, 'The *baan* will kill you. Let someone else dispose of it.' And he replied, 'Had a man said that to me, I would have spat at his feet. Lady, as you know perfectly well, I am one of the Sixth House: the Sixth Beast destroyed my father, and he brought down the Beast; for a hundred generations and a hundred of its incarnations, the Beast has felled an ancestor of mine and died in doing so. "It may be my fate to destroy it once and for all, by surviving the encounter. Lady, that is matter of chance; but should the *baan* of Duirinish be that Beast, my duty is not.'

Once, he came to understand the expression in her queer eyes, but when the dawn came, he found that he had forgotten the revelation.

And the night before they called him to see a dead man in a dull house on a quiet cobbled street by Alves, she begged him to leave the city, lest the *baan* be the doom of them both; a plea that he quite failed to understand.

In a chamber at the top of the house-

A place of midnight-blue silk drapes and small polished stone tables. There was a carpet like fine thick cellar mould, with a unwelcome stain. One stone wall had no hangings: to it were pinned charts of the night sky, done in a finicky hand. Beneath an open skylight, which framed the fading Name Stars and admitted almost reluctantly a clammy dawn – the corpse.

It had tumbled over a collection of astronomical instruments and lay clumsily among them, taking serene, empty-eyed measure of a beautiful, complicated little orrery.

Cromis, like a crow in his black travelling cloak, noted the heavy fur robe of the dead astronomer, the fat, beringed fingers and the fatter face; the greying flesh with its consistency of coarse blotting paper; the messy ringlets that covered what remained of the skull.

Even in death, the merchant had a faint air of embarrassment about him, as if he still sat by the fire in the Blue Metal Discovery on a sleety night, avoiding the eyes of the woman in the hooded purple cloak.

He would suffer no further embarrassment, for the top of his head had been torn raggedly off. Schooled in the signs, and having no need of a closer look, Cromis of the Sixth House knew that head was as empty as a breakfast egg, the painstaking mercenary brain – stolen?

He took up the orrery and absently turned the clockwork that set it in motion; jewelled planets hurried whirring round the splendid sun. Unconscious of the impression he had made on the third occupant of the room, he asked:

‘Was nothing seen?’

Turning warily to the lord who played so callously with a dead man’s toys, the young uncomfortable proctor who had discovered the outrage shuddered and shook his head.

‘No my lord - ,’ His eyes ranging the chamber, avoiding at all costs the corpse ‘- but a great noise work some neighbours.’ He could not control his hands or his tremors.

'You have alerted the gatewardens?'

'Sir, they have seen nothing. But-'

'Yes?' impatiently.

'A fresh trail leads from the city, of blood. Sir?'

"Good.'

'Sir, I am going to be sick.'

'Then leave.'

The youth obeyed, and gazing back over his shoulder at the grim corpse and grimmer avenger, stumbled through the door with the expression of a rabbit confronted by two ferrets. Cromis followed the motion of the planets through a complete cycle.

A commotion on the stairs.

'What a mess out there, said Rotgob the dwarf, bursting in and strutting round the stiff while Dissolution Kahn studied puzzledly the star charts. 'That is a very unprofessional job. Somebody is far too caught up with his definition of death. Too much emotion to be art.'

'You and the Kahn had better make ready our horses.'

In the trembling light after dawn, they left the Stony City and rode into the north, following a clear spoor.

Rivermist rose fading towards the bleak sky in slender spires and pillars, hung over the slow water like a shroud. Duirinish was silent but for the trampling of guards on the battlements. A heron perched on a rotting log to watch as they forded the northern meander of the Minfolin. If it found them curious it gave no sign, but flapped heavily away as the white spray flew from trotting hooves.

Dissolution Kahn rode in the lead with wry pride, his massive frame clad in mail lacquered cobalt-blue. Over the mail he wore a silk surcoat of the same acid yellow as his mare's caparisons. He had relinquished his rustic hat, and his mane of blond hair blew back in the light wind. At his side was a great broadsword with a silver-bound hilt. The roan mare arched her powerful neck, shook her delicate head. Her

bridle was of soft red leather, with a subtle leather filigree inlaid.

To tegus-Cromis, hunched against the morning chill on a sombre black gelding, wrapped in his crow-cloak, it seemed that the Kahn and his horse threw back the light like challenge: for a moment, they were heraldic and invincible, the doom to which they travelled something beautiful and unguessed. But the emotion was brief, and passed.

As he went, his seat insecure on a scruffy packhorse, his only armor a steel-stressed leather cap, Rotgob the dwarf chanted a Rivermouth song of forgotten meaning, *The Dead Freight Dirge*:

*Burn them up and sow them deep;
Oh, drive them down!
Heavy weather in the Fleet,
Oh, drive them down!
Gather them up and drive them down,
Oh, sow them deep!
Driving wind and plodding feet,
Oh, drive them down!*

And as the ritualistic syllables rolled, Cromis found himself sinking into a reverie of death and spoliation, haunted by grey, translucent images of the dead merchant in his desecrated chamber, of telescopes and strange astrologies. The face of the woman in the hooded purple cloak hung before him, in the grip of some deep but undefinable sorrow. He was aware of the Marsh, somewhere up ahead, embodiment of his peculiar destiny and his unbearable heritage.

He was receding from the world, as if the cocaine fit were on him and all his anchor chains were cut, when Kahn reined in his mare and called them to a halt.

‘There’s our way. The Beast has left the road here, as you see.’

A narrow track ran east from the road. Fifty yards along it, the bracken and gorse of the valley failed and the terrain became brown, faintly iridescent bog, streaked with slicks of purple and oily yellow. Beyond that rose thickets of strangely shaped trees. The river meandered through it, slow and broad, flanked by dense reedbeds of a bright ochre colour. The wind blew from the east, carrying a a bitter, metallic smell.

‘Some might find it beautiful,’ said Cromis.

Where the bracken petered out, a dyke had been sunk to prevent the herd animals of the Low Leedale from wandering into the bog. It was deep and steep-sided, full of stagnant water over which lay a multicoloured film of scum. They crossed by a gated wooden bridge, the hooves of their horses clattering hollowing.

‘I don’t,’ said Rotgob the dwarf. ‘It stinks.’

3

Deep in the Mash, the path wound tortuously between umber-iron bogs, albescent quicksands of aluminum and magnesium oxides, and sumps of cuprous blue or permanganate mauve fed by slow geld streams, and fringed by silver reeds. The trees were smooth-barked, yellow-ochre and burnt-orange; through their tightly woven foliage filtered a gloomy light. At their roots grew tall black grasses and great clumps of multifaceted transparent crystal, like alien fungi.

Charcoal-grey frogs with viridescent eyes croaked as they floundered between the pools. Beneath the greasy surface of the water unidentifiable reptiles moved slowly and sinuously. Dragonflies whose webby wings spanned a foot or more hummed and hovered between the sedges: their long wicked bodies glittered green and ultramarine; they took their prey on the wing, pouncing with an audible snap of

jaws on whining ephemera and fluttering moths of april blue and chevrolet cerise.

Over everything hung the oppressive stench of rotting metal.

After an hour, Cromis's mouth was coated by a bitter deposit, and he tasted acids. He found it difficult to speak. While his horse slithered and stumbled beneath him, he gazed about in wonder, and poetry moved in his skull, swift as the jewelled mosquito-hawks over a dark current of ancient decay.

He drove Rotgob and the Kahn hard, sensing the imminence of his meeting with the *baan* now that the blood-trail had vanished and they followed a line of big, shapeless impressions in the mud. But the horses were reluctant, confused by prussian streams and fragile organic-pink sky. At times, they refused to move, bracing their legs and trembling. They turned rolling white eyes on their owners, who cursed and sank to their boot tops in the slime, releasing huge acrid bubbles of gas.

When they emerged from the trees for a short while about noon, Cromis noticed that the true sky was full of racing, wind-torn clouds; and despite its exotic colours, the Marsh was cold.

By the evening of that day, they were still on the hunt, and had reached the shallow waters of Cobaltmere in the northern reaches of the Marsh. They had lost one pack-pony to the shifting sands; the other had died painfully after drinking from a deceptively clear pool, its limbs swelling up and blood pouring from its corroded internal organs. They were tired and filthy, and they had lost the beast's spoor.

They made camp in a fairly dry clearing halfway round the waterlogged ambit of the mere. Far out on the water lay fawn mudbanks streaked with sudden yellow, and floating islands of matted vegetation on which waterbirds cackled, ruffling their electric-blue feathers. As the day decayed, the

colours were numbed: but in the funereal light of sunset, the water of the Cobaltmere came alive with mile-long stains of cochineal and mazarine.

Cromis was woken some time before dawn by what he assumed to be the cold. A dim disturbing phosphorescence of fluctuating colour hung over the mere and its environs; caused by some odd quality of the water there, it gave an even but wan light. There were no shadows. Trees loomed vague and damp at the periphery of the clearing.

When he found it impossible to sleep again, he moved nearer to the dead embers of the fire. He lay there uneasily, wrapped in blanket and cloak, his fingers laced beneath his head, staring up at the Name Stars and the enigmatic Group.

Beside him humped the Kahn, snoring. The horses shifted drowsily. A nocturnal mosquito-hawk with huge obsidian globes for eyes hunted over the shallows, humming and snapping. He watched it for a moment, fascinated. The sound of water draining through the reedbeds. Rotgob was on watch: he moved slowly round the clearing and out of Cromis's field of vision, blowing warmth into his cupped hands, cursing as his feet sank with soft noises into the earth.

Cromis closed his eyes, depressed, insomniac. He wondered if the Sixth Beast had reversed its role. Incidents of such a reversal filtered up to him from the dim, haunted library stacks of his youth, where his doomed father had taught him harsh lore. Black lettered spins and a pale woman he had always wanted to know.

He thought of the woman in the hooded purple cloak as he had first seen her.

Her heard a faint sigh behind him: not close, and too low pitched to wake a sleeping man, but of peculiar strength and urgency.

Fear gnawed him, and he could not suppress sudden images of his father's corpse and its return to the libraries.

He felt for the hilt of the nameless sword. Finding it, he rolled cautiously on to his stomach, making as little unnecessary movement as possible and breathing through his open mouth. This manoeuvre brought into view the segment of the clearing previously invisible to him. He studied the point from which the sound had come.

The glade was quiet and ghastly. A dark wound marked its entrance. The horses issued breath or ectoplasm. One of them had cocked its ears forward alertly.

He could neither hear or see the dwarf.

Carefully, he freed himself from his blanket, eased his sword a few inches from its scabbard. Reflex impelled him to crouch low as he ran across the clearing. When he encountered the corpse of the dwarf, he recognized a little of the horror that had lived with him under the guise of ennui since the death of his father.

Small and huddled, Rotgob had already sunk slightly into the wet ground. There was no blood apparent, and his limbs were uncut. He had not drawn his long stiletto.

Clasping the cold, stubbled jaw, his skin crawling with revulsion. The dwarf snarled – unlike the merchant, unembarrassed in the presence of death. His fingers, though, were all in a knot. Cromis moved the the head, and the neck was unbroken, hard to flex. The skull, then. He probed reluctantly, withdrew his fingers, clasped his head in his hands; and, recovering, wiped his face with the edge of his cloak.

On his feet, swallowing bile, he shivered. The night silent but for the far-off sleepless hum of a dragonfly. The earth around the corpse was poached and churned. Big, shapeless impressions led out of the glade to the south. He followed them, swaying, without waking the Kahn.

It was a personal thing with him.

Away from the Cobaltmere, the phosphorescence faded. He followed the tracks swiftly. They left the path at a place where the trees were underlit by clumps of blue crystal. Bathed in an unsteady glow, he stopped to strain his ears. Nothing but the sound of water. It occurred to him that he was alone. The earth sucked his feet. The trees were weird, their boughs a frozen writhe.

To the left, a branch snapping.

He whirled, threw himself into the undergrowth, hacking out with the nameless sword. At each step he sank into the muck; small animals scuttled away from him; foliage clutched his limbs.

Breathing heavily in a tiny clearing with a dangerous pool. After a minute, he could hear nothing; after two, nothing more.

‘If I’d come alone, the first encounter would have been the last. Go home, Kahn, please. Or to Duirinish, and wait for me.’

They buried the dwarf before dawn, working in the odd light of Cobaltmere. Dissolution Kahn wrapped his dead friend’s fingers round the thing that was neither a short sword nor a long stiletto. ‘You never know where you might find a dark alley.’ He seemed to bear Cromis no grudge for the death, but dug silently, putting in more effort than the earth warranted.

‘The dwarf was a good fighter. He killed four Princes-’ This, he repeated absently, twice ‘-I’ll stay with it until we’ve finished the job.’

The temperature had been dropping steadily for hours. A few brittle flakes of snow filtered through the colourful foliage, out of context. Lord tegus-Cromis huddled into his cloak, touched the turned earth with his foot.

He thought of the high passes of Monar, suffocating in snow.

‘Kahn, you don’t understand. History is against you. The Sixth House . . . The responsibility is mine. By sharing it, I’ve

killed three people instead of one . . .’

The Kahn spat.

‘I’ll stay with it.’

Later, sucking bits of food from his moustache, he said: ‘You take a single setback too hard, Have some cooked pig?’

There are still two of us.’

From the eyots and reedbeds, fowl cackled: sensing a change, they were gathering in great multicoloured drifts on the surface of the lake, slow migratory urges climaxing in ten thousand small, dreary skulls.

Cromis laughed dully.

He took out his pewter snuffbox and stared at it. ‘Snow, Kahn,’ he murmured. ‘A grain of snow.’ He shrugged. ‘Or two.’ He undid the box.

The Kahn reached out and knocked it from his hand.

‘That won’t help,’ he said pleasantly.

Only half was spilt, and perhaps half of that spoilt. Cromis scooped the rest up, closed the box carefully. He stood, brushed the filth from his knees.

‘Your mother,’ he said, ‘was a sow.’ He let the Kahn see a few inches of the nameless word. ‘She gave men diseases.’

‘How you found out is a mystery to me. Come on, Lord Cromis, it’s dawn.’

The snow held off for a while

4

‘Nobody has been here for a hundred years.’

At the extreme northwestern edge of the Marsh, where the concentration of metal salts washed off the Rust Desert was low, saner vegetation had taken hold: willow drooped over the watercourses, the reedbeds were cream and brown, creaking in the cold wind. But the malformations were of a subtler and more disturbing kind – something in the stance

of the trees, the proportion of the interface insects – and there was no great lessening of the gloom.

‘A pity. Had the place been charted, we might have come to it directly and saved-’

‘A life?’

‘Some trouble.’”

An ancient roundtower reared above the trees. Built of fawn stone at some time when the earth was firmer, it stood crookedly, weathered like an old bone. Filaments of dead ivy crawled over it; blackthorn and alder hid its base: a withered bullace grew from an upper window, its rattling branches inhabited by small, stealthy birds.

Closing on it, they found that its lower storeys were embedded in the earth: the low, rectangular openings spaced evenly round its damp walls were foundered windows. Three or four feet above the muck it was girdled by a broad band of fungus, like ringworm on the limb of an unhealthy man.

“My father’s books hinted at the existence of a sinking tower, but placed it in the east.’

‘You could live to correct them.’

‘Perhaps.’ Cromis urged his horse forward, drew his sword. Birds fled the blackthorn. Snow had begun to fall again, the flakes softer this time, and larger. ‘Are we foolhardy to approach so openly?’”

The Kahn got off his roan mare and studied the deep, clumsy spoor of the *baan*. An avenue of broken branches and crushed sedge ended in a patch of trampled ground before one of the sunken windows: as if the thing grew careless in the security of tis lair. He scratched his head.

“Yes.”

He gazed at the tower, and said nothing for some minutes. Grey snow eddied about his motionless figure, settled briefly in his beard. His cloak flapped and cracked in the wind, and he fingered the hilt of his broadsword uneasily. He went a

little nearer the dark opening. He paced backwards away from it.

Finally, he said:

“I’m afraid I can’t get in there, it’s too small.”

Cromis nodded.

‘You’ll keep watch.’

‘I would come if I could. You are mad if you do it alone.’

Cromis took off his cloak.

‘There is already a thing between us unsettled. Don’t add another one. There is no onus on you. Watch my back.’

Visibility had dropped to ten paces. Glimpsed through a shifting white curtain, the Kahn’s face was expressionless; but his eyes were bemused and hurt. Cromis threw his cloak over the hindquarters of his shivering horse, then turned and walked quickly to the sunken window. Snow was already gathering on its lintel. He felt the Kahn’s eyes on him.

“Leave now!” he shouted into the wind. ‘It doesn’t want you!’

He got down on his hands and knees, trying to keep the nameless sword pointed ahead of him. A queer mixture of smells bellied out of the slot into his face: the stink of rotting dung, overlayed by a strong, pleasant musk.

He coughed. Against his will, he hung back. He heard the Kahn call out from a long way off. Ashamed, he thrust his head into the hole, wriggled frantically through.

It was dark, and nothing met him.

He tried to stand; halfway upright, hit his head on the damp ceiling. Doors for dwarves, he thought, doors for dwarves.

Cold, foul, liquid dripped into his hair and down his cheek.

He crouched, began to stumble about, thrusting with his sword and sobbing unpleasant challenges. His feet slide on a soft and rotten surface; he fell. The sword struck orange sparks from a wall.

He conceived a terrible fear of something behind him.

He danced, made a bitter stroke.

The lair was empty.

He dropped his sword and wept.

'I didn't ask for this!' he told his childhood: but it was lost among the library stacks, learning ways to kill the Beast. 'I didn't *ask* to come here!'

He lay in the dung, groping about; clasped the blade of the sword and lacerated the palm of his hand. He squirmed through the window, out into the blind snow.

'Kahn!' he shouted. 'Kahn!'

He stood up, using the sword as a crutch. Blood ran down it. He took a few uncertain steps, looking for the horses. They were gone.

He ran three times round the base the building, crying out. Confused by the snow – settling on the trees, it produced harsh contrasts, further distorting the landscape – he had difficulty locating his starting point. The accident with the sword had left three of his fingers useless, the tendons were cut. After he had rubbed some cocaine into the wound and bound it up, he went to look for the Kahn.

A layer of grey, greasy slush had formed on the ground. Bent forward against the weather, he picked up two sets of hoofprints leading back towards the Cobaltmere.

He looked back once at the sinking tower. High up on its southern face a group of windows with eroded, indistinct edges regarded him sympathetically. Snow gathered on his shoulders: he blundered into sumps and streams; he lost the trail and found it again. The pain in his hand receded to a great distance. He began to snigger gently at his experiences in the lair of the Beast.

The wildfowl were gone from Cobaltmere. He stood by a fast purple watercourse and caught glimpses through the snow of long vacant sandbanks and reefs. He down to the water. He went down to the water. His horse was lying there, its head in the mere, its body swollen, his cloak still wrapped and tangled round its hindquarters. Blood oozed from its mouth and anus. The veins in its eyes were yellow.

He heard a faint, fading cry above the sound of the wind.

Dissolution Kahn sat on his pink roan mare in a sombre clearing by the water.

Melting snow had washed his splendid mail of the filth of the marsh, and he held his sword high above his head. The mare's silk caparisons gleamed against a claustrophobic backdrop. She arched her neck, shook her delicate head, and her breath steamed. The Kahn's hair blew back like a pennant, and he was laughing.

To tegus-Cromis, forcing his way through a stand of mutated willows that clutched desperately at his clothes, it seemed that the glade could not contain them: they had passed beyond it into heraldry, and were invincible.

And although the the Sixth Beast was intimately his, he gained no clear image of it as loomed above man and horse.

Shaking its plumage irritably, it broke wind and lifted a clawed paw to scratch a suppurating place on its pachyderm hide. Chitinous scales rattled like dead reeds. It roared and whistled sardonically, winked a heavy lid over one insectile eye; did a clumsy dance of sexual lust on its hind hooves, writhed its coils in stupid menace.

It tried to form words.

It laughed delightedly, lifted a wing and preened. A pleasant musk filled the glade. It reached for the doomed man on his beautiful horse with long brittle fingers.

It said distinctly"

'I am a liar as well as a dwarf.'

It sent a hot stream of urine into the sodden earth.

It increased its size by a factor of two, staggered, giggled, regained its balance, and fell at the Kahn.

Cromis dragged himself free of the willows and ran into the glade, yelling, 'Run, Kahn, run!'

Blood splatted the roan mare's caparisons.

Dissolution Kahn vomited suddenly, clinging to his saddle as the horse reared. He recovered, swung his weapon in a wide arc. He grunted, swayed. The Beast overshadowed him. He stabbed it.

It howled.

'NO!' pleaded Cromis.

'No!' moaned the beast.

It began to diminish.

Kahn sat on the mare with his head bowed. He dropped his sword. His mail was in shreds: here and there, strips of it were embedded in his flesh.

Before him, the Sixth Beast of Viriconium, the mutable Lamia, shrivelled, shedding wings and scales. Every facet of its eyes went dull. 'Please,' it said. A disgusting stink blew away on the wind. Certain of its limbs withered away, leaving warty stumps. Iridescent fluids mixed with the water of the Marsh. Its mouths clicked feebly.

A little later, when the corpse of the Beast, having repeated all its incarnations, had attained its final shrunken form, the Kahn looked up. His face was pouchy and lined. He slid out of the saddle, wearily slapped the mare's neck. The snow eased off, stopped.

He looked at Cromis. He might never have seen him before. He jerked his thumb at the corpse.

'You should have killed her at the inn,' he said.

He stumbled backwards. His mouth fell open. When he looked down and saw the nameless sword protruding from his lower belly, he whimpered. A quick, violent shudder went through him. Blood dribbled down his thighs. He reached down and slowly put his hands on the sword.

'Why?'

"It was mine, Kahn. The beast was mine to kill. It's dead, but I'm still alive. I never expected this. What can I do now?"

Dissolution Kahn sat down carefully, still holding the sword. He coughed and wiped his mouth.

‘Give me some of that cocaine. I could still make it out of here.’

Abruptly, he laughed.

‘You were gulled,’ he said bitterly, ‘every one of you. Your ancestors were all gulled.’

‘It was easy to kill. You spent your lives in misery, but was *easy*. How do you feel about that? Please give me some of that stuff.’

‘What will I do?’ whispered Cromis.

Dissolution Kahn twisted round until he faced the corpse of the woman in the hooded purple cloak. He leant forward, steadied the pommel of the nameless sword against her ribs, and pushed himself on to it. He groaned.

Lord tegus-Cromis sat in the glade until evening, the little pewter box on his knee. He saw nothing. Eventually, he pulled the nameless sword from the Kahn’s belly and threw it into the mere.

He swung himself onto the long roan mare, wrapped the dead man’s cloak around him.

On his way out of the clearing, he contemplated the final avatar of the Lamia the Beast.

‘You should have killed me at the inn,’ he said. On an impulse, he dismounted, took the clasp of her cloak. ‘Lady, you should have done it’

He road north all night, and when he came from under the trees of the Marsh, he avoided looking up, in case the Name Stars should reflect some immense and unnatural change below.

THREE

The Bait Principle

In the basement were the offices of Hodgson the almoner, two treatment rooms that took the overspill from the security wards, and a small laundry. On Thursdays, the uniforms of the male nurses were washed; during the rest of the week, the clothes of the National Health patients. Each nurse was required to possess three uniforms; to ensure this, Hodgson ran spot checks on their quarters.

The lateral extraction shaft of the laundry served the secondary purpose of carrying warm air to a system of ducts beneath both male and female long-stay wards; this arrangement saved on heating bills during the winter. This idea had earned the congratulations of the Board of Trustees.

Christian Heinecken, wrote Hodgson, was born in Lubeck, in 1721. He was said to have talked fluently within a few hours of his birth. Like Cardiac the Parisian, he read Latin and

French before his third birthday. Neither of them, however . .

It was his thesis, *The Infant Prodigy Related to Transient Social Disequilibria*, with which he hoped to gain an extramural doctorate from the University of Bristol. He stopped writing to listen to the noises from the ventilator shaft. Distastefully, he brushed animal hairs from his working jacket.

A week after Mayer's physical symptoms had receded, he dreamed he was flying. There were three acres of flat smooth turf, bounded by a tall chain-link fence.

He was swooping, varying his altitude between two and thirty feet, occasionally perching on the fence like a small bird gripping the sides of a cage. He was naked, and wattled at the joints.

After a while, he saw his brothers walking over the turf. He shot over their heads immediately; circled them; did bunts and loops, hoping to attract their attention. They looked up and said: 'An unexpected arrival.' They told him a few things he already knew. Then they walked, ignoring him, to a turnstile set in the fence. He kept pace.

After 'lights out', he lay listening to the breathing in the next bed. He had to be quite careful. He knew he was turning into a bird.

Jane, the adult prodigy in Long Stay (female), dosed with largactil that hadn't yet taken effect, was watching speeded-up blue movies flicker across the wall like industrial photo-micrographs in a blinker, or a quick voyeuristic sequence of growing vegetables. In two minutes, how many penetrations, how many complicated angles. She sat on her bed to watch, wearing the top half of her pajamas, which was all they allowed her, swaying in time to her internal plan for beating the largactil and saying: I had this *friend*, I had this *friend*.

The king escaped the hunters and came in unnoticed by her, but all the other patients made a fuss of him.

'I feel that all the patients are turning into cats,' Hodgson said. He found that something had worked its way into his mouth as he spoke and lodged beneath his tongue. He spat it out and saw that it was a ball of hair, like an owl's pellet.

Hollis, the R.S.P.C.A. spokesman, said, 'So I'm advising you to use traps. There are several humane models working on the bait principal. If you then turn them over to us, we'll attempt retraining and perhaps find them good homes. If that doesn't work (which I'm afraid is very likely), we'll dispose of them painlessly.

'We never recommend poison: there's the risk of infection, and the new ones aren't very kind, you know.'

While he talked, he made small, involved drawings of the humane devices on a scratchpad. They soon covered it from edge to edge, some of them interlocking.

'If you don't mind, inspector, I have to buy my own note pads,' said Hodgson.

Hollis smiled. 'Oh dear me. We had a similar situation in Sheffield about a year ago. Shooting them is out of the question here of course. We had about two hundred of them there.'

'We try to limit them to the garden. They never get as far as the wards.'

From left to right, the other long-stay males were: Gordon Maddock; Michael Polesworth; young Mr. Rees; Michael Jeffries, a 'tall, dark-haired, athletic-looking man, much respected by his colleagues'; Mr. Redvers Davies.

They were in the lavatories.

'Some boys shook the street lamps, but the vision didn't move.'

He put the toothbrush in his wet bag.

'I had the last laugh after all! Hee-Hee.'

He waved his arms.

'On one night alone there was a crowd of three hundred people outside my house.'

The nurses came and gave *him* a treatment.

'In twenty years the students will be manufacturing them in the cellars.'

'After I became ill, we found out.'

Mayer the bird knew it was Jeffries he had to watch. It was the way he ate. Maddock was trustworthy.

In therapy, Jane added up numbers again, imagining she was the Theta Queen, hung with copper brooches and periapts. Theta, theta, theta she thought. The quick blue movies were now projected on the doctor's face. His lips shed the locked wet limbs easily, but as he said 'marginal difference' his forehead climaxed, biting its fingers and blurrily waving its legs. Jane calculated some powers and translated the answers into Latin numbers.

She could see out of the window, which revealed a small arc of the garden. The gardener had watered the rhododendrons, a pink wet tangle, although some of them were white. She saw a drop of water roll off one the blossoms; followed it down into the secret brown dirt. She fidgeted with her hair ribbon. The hose was out there.

The king came out of the rhododendrons and sat down.

What if the doctor should see him? He would call the gardener, and then she might never get back. She grasped at straws. Leaning forward, she said nicely but loudly:

'I had this *friend*.'

The doctor smiled at her, distorting his face-movie. But the gardener was a long way away, and the king yawned and went back into the bushes.

The autist in the corner of Therapy began to do things to herself.

Hodgson had got into the ventilator shaft without difficulty.

He squirmed along, pushing a small caravan of baited traps in front of him. Meal-coloured dust clung to sides of the tube and hung in weepy festoons from the brackets and stanchions that braced its junctions. The air was warm and moist. A wisp of steam drifted past him. The traps clattered and jumped over the riveted seams. He had passed four junctions and laid a trap at each. The shaft seemed longer from the inside. He thought he might be underneath Long Stay (male).

Coming to a place from which radiated several shafts of lesser diameter, he got into a sitting position and began to deploy the remaining traps. He noticed that the dust had drifted into peninsulas and vortices, and an image occurred to him.

A tabby female came out of one of the subsidiary shafts. He shouted and struck out, and it bit him.

His head hit the side of the shaft and confused him. The female sniffed the bait, purred, and *rubbed itself against him*. He shouted again, and backed off.

Others appeared. Soon there were hundreds of them.

They surrounded him, ignoring the traps. 'Eat the bait, eat the bait,' he said. They licked his face and pushed their long unkempt bodies against his cheeks and neck and the backs of his hands. He wept and pushed at them. He hated fur.

He discovered that he had become wedged between some metal struts at the nexus of the two ducts. The way he had come was obscured by steam, but he could see the other end of the main shaft, where it emerged behind the rhododendrons.

Mayer managed to get the bed between them. The huge cat lashed its tail. For a moment, it was stalemate. Might it leap the bed? In a very short while he would remember how to fly and that would be all right.

‘Hodgson’s unfortunate accident,’ said Halloran, the temporary almoner, ‘may well have acted as a trigger. Rumour spreads very quickly in such a closed system. He noticed that only his own blotting paper remained clean. He pretended to test his ballpoint pen on it. The others had fiber-tipped pens and fountain pens.

‘This is all very well. But it goes no further towards explaining the patient Mayer’s death. The circumstances, for instance.’

Halloran looked round the table, from left to right. The Board of Trustees comprised: Norman Bocker; Sir Gilbert Rees; Delfont; Lady Rees; and Gopert, a J.P. He knew it was Lady Rees he had to watch. He had studied her over lunch.

‘The *press*,’ said Gopert the J.P.

‘The circumstances have been exaggerated somewhat.’ Halloran broke the plastic clip of his pen.

‘In fact, there was no question of Mayer being ‘eaten’. He had suffered some slight laceration and bruising by Jeffries’s fingernails and teeth; but the suggestion that he was “eaten” is a quite ridiculous assumption on the part of some the more highly-strung male patients.

‘Each will share another’s fantasy readily, should it lead to some ephemeral bond of mutual sympathy. Nothing more, I assure you.’

‘Better stop admitting these N.H. patients for a while, eh?’ said Sir Gilbert. ‘Can’t trust the buggers, eh?’

The Theta Queen sat on her bed in her pajama top, licking at a scab on her buttock. The Roots and Powers would deliver her. She watched the movies from half an eye, sleepily lapped in the warmth of the long-stay ward. She curled up and thought of how the king might transform her entirely, and take her down, hung with numerals and mandalas, to his mazy kingdom in the even warmer world below; and how, on a beautiful evening, among the rhododendrons,

they might mate with flickering blue speed, so fast that no one need ever know.

FOUR

Running Down

I knew Lyall, certainly, and I was in the Great Langdale Valley at the time: but I had no place in the events of that autumn in the late '70s – no active place, that is; and I could no more have prevented them than the eroded heather of the rhacomitrium-heath can 'prevent' the wind. More important, perhaps, I could not have foreseen, much less averted, Lyall's end. He may have been insane long before the nightmare of Jack's Rake, but that does not explain why the earth shook; he may have murdered the hapless woman who lived with him to further some fantastic metaphysical image he had of himself, but that relates in no way your or I could understand to what I saw on the summit of Pavey Ark in the early hours of a haunted morning, the *ascent* that has remained with me, waking or sleeping ever since.

Lyall was never more than an acquaintance of mine even at Cambridge, where we shared a room and might have been described as 'close'; in fact there were times when we found it difficult to disguise our dislike for one another.

Nevertheless, we clung together, embittered and hurt – neither of us could make any warm contact with our contemporaries. To be honest: no one else would put up with use, so we put up with each other. It's common enough. Even now, Cambridge is all comfortable November mists, nostalgic ancient quadrangles, the conspiracy of the choir practising at King's – pure, ecstatic, and a constant wound to the outsider. It was inevitable that Lyall and I should press those wounds together to achieve some sort of sour blood-fraternity. I suppose that's hard to understand; but it must be a common enough human compulsion.

Lyall was tall and ectomorphic, with a manner already measured, academic, middle-aged. His face was long and equine, its watery eyes, pursed mouth and raw cheeks accusatory, as if he blamed the world outside for his own desperate awkwardness. He did: and affected a callow but remorseless cynicism to cover it. He was a brilliant student, but comically accident-prone – constantly scratched and bruised, his clothes stained with oil and ink and food. His background (he had been brought up by two impoverished, determined maiden ladies in Bath) chafed the tender flesh of my own early experience under the bleak shadow of the southern end of the Pennines – the open-coffin funerals of a failing industrial town, a savage unemployment, black Methodism.

We must have made a strange pair in those endless winter fogs: Lyall as thin as a stick, hopeless in the tweed jacket and college scarf his aunts insisted he wear, his inflamed nose always running, his wrists and ankles protruding dismally from the awful clothes; and myself, short of leg, barrel chested and heavily muscled about the shoulders and ridiculous long arms for the solitary climbing and fell-walking that had in adolescence become my passionate escape from the back-terraces of the North. In those days, before the Dru accident, I could do a hundred press-ups with a fifty pound pack on my back, I was sullen, dark,

aggressive, and so terrified of being nicknamed 'Ape' by the fragile, intellectual young women of the modern languages faculty that no one but Lyall ever had the miserable chance. God knows why we do these things to ourselves.

So: it was a temporary alliance. I have memories of Lyall's high, complaining voice, his ruthless wit and feral disappointment as we separated on the last day of the last term. He took a poor Honours, due to an unfortunate bicycle accident a week before Finals: but mine was poorer (although somewhat ameliorated by the offer of a junior instructorship I'd received from an Outward Bound school in Kenya). His handclasp was curt, mine cursory. We were both faintly relieved, I think.

We never sought each other out. I believe he tried several jobs in the provinces before becoming the junior personnel officer of a small manufacturing firm in London, which was where I met him again, quite by chance, some two or three years later.

A week off the boat from North Africa – and finding it almost as difficult to adapt the dirty chill of late autumn after Kenya's steak at twenty-five the kilo – I was wandering rather morosely about in the West End, wondering if I could afford to go into a cinema and waste another evening, when I spotted him teetering at a kerb trying to hail a taxi. Two ignored him while I watched. He hadn't changed much: his ghastly college scarf was now tucked into the neck of a thin raincoat, and he was carrying one of those wretched little plastic 'executive' cases. The contemptuous grooves round his mouth had deepened.

'Oh, hallo, Egerton,' he said off-handedly, staring away from me down the road. He looked drunk. One of his hands was inexpertly bandaged with a great wad of dirty white gauze. He fiddled with his case. 'Why on earth did *you* come back to this rat-hole? I'd have thought you were better off out of it.'

I felt like a deserter returning to some doomed ship only to find its captain still alive and brooding alone over the white water and foul ground: but I was surprised to remembered at all, and, when he finally captured his taxi, I agreed to go home with him.

It turned out that he'd been in another taxi when it became involved in some minor fracas with a pedestrian, and had to get out. 'I should have been home bloody hours ago,' he said sourly. That was all: and by the time we reached his flat I was beginning to regret an impulse which had basically been one of sympathy. There was an argument with the driver, too, over a malfunctioning meter. It was always like that with Lyall. But Holloway isn't Cambridge.

He had two poky, unwelcoming rooms at the top of a large finished house. The place had a sink, a filthy gas-stove and some carpets glazed with ancient grease: it was littered with dirty crocks, empty milk bottles, every kind of rubbish conceivable; everything in it seemed to be damaged and old; it was indescribably cheerless.

When I declined the offer of a can of soup (partly because he was at pains to let me see he had nothing else in the cupboard where he kept his food, and partly out of horror at that mephitic stove) he shrugged ungraciously, sat crosslegged on the floor among the old newspapers and political pamphlets - he seemed to have become interested in some popular nationalist organization, to the extent anyway of scrawling 'Rubbish!' or 'A reasonable assumption' in the margins of some of the stuff - and ate it ravenously straight out of the pan. He was preoccupied by some slight he'd received at work. 'Bloody jumped-up filing clerks,' he explained, 'every one of them. You'd better sit on the bed Egerton. There's nothing else, so you needn't bother to look for it.'

Later, he insisted on going out to an off-license and fetching back some half-pint bottles of stout This produced a parody of fellowship, strung with gaunt silence. We really had

nothing in common anymore, especially since Lyall would mention Cambridge only in the cryptic, barbed asides of which he was so fond.

But he seemed determined; and I took it as a desperate attempt on his part to achieve some sort of contact, some sort of human feeling among all that cold squalor. His loneliness was apparent – in deference to it, I talked; and I was quite happy to fall in with his mood until I realized that had adopted a most curious conversational procedure.

This consisted in first eliciting from me some reminiscences of my time in Africa, then blatantly ignoring me as I talked – flicking through the pages of a girlie magazine, picking up books only to toss them aside again, staring out of the uncurtained windows at the ominous sodium light outside; even whistling or humming. He took to breaking in on my anecdotes to say, apropos of nothing. ‘I really ought to have that scarf cleaned,’ or, ‘What’s that racket in the street? Damned lunatics,’ and then when (perfectly relieved to escape from what had become an agonizing monologue) I made some answering remark about the London air or traffic, demanding: ‘What? Oh, go on, go on, you mustn’t pay me any attention.’

I talked desperately. I found myself becoming more and more determined to overcome his scarcely-veiled sneers and capture his attention, inventing at one point an adventure on Mount Nyiru that I simply hadn’t had – although it did happen to a fellow instructor of mine shortly after his arrival at the school.

It was an eerier experience. What satisfaction he could have from it, I can’t imagine.

‘Fairly pleased with yourself then, are you? He said suddenly. He went on to repeat himself, rocking to and fro. ‘Fairly pleased-’ And he laughed.

In the end, I got up and made some excuse, a train, a matter of a hotel key: what else could I have done?

He leapt immediately to his feet, the most ludicrous expression of regret on his face. 'Wait, Egerton!' he said. 'you can't go without finishing the last bottle, can you?' I shrugged, 'I'll only chuck it out. I'll just-' He lurched about, kicking up drifts of rubbish. He hadn't taken off that flimsy raincoat off all night. 'I can't seem-'

'Let me.' And I took the bottle away from him.

I bought my knife at Frank Davies' in Ambleside, more than twenty years ago. Among its extensible, obsessive gadgets is a thing like a claw, for levering off the caps of bottles. I'd used it a thousand times before that night; more. I latched it on to the cap with my right hand, holding the neck of the bottle with my left. An odd thing happened. The cap resisted; I pulled hard; the bottle broke in my hand, producing a murderous fork of brown glass.

Beer welled up over a deep and painful gash between my thumb and forefinger, pink and frothy. I stared at it. 'Christ.'

But if the accident was odd, Lyall's reaction was odder. He groaned. Then he began to laugh. I sucked at the wound, staring helplessly at him over my hand. He turned away, fell on his knees in front of his bed and beat his hands on it. 'Bugger off, Egerton!' he croaked. His laughter turned suddenly into great heaving sobs. 'Get out of my sight!' I stood looking stupidly down at him for a moment, at the thin shoulders crawling beneath that dirty raincoat, the miserable drift of *Guardians* and girlie magazines and Patriotic Front literature: then turned and stumbled down the stairs like a blind man.

It wasn't until I'd slammed the outside door that the full realization of what had happened hit me. I sat down for a minute among the the dented bins and rotting planks of the concrete area, shivering in what I suppose must have been shock. I remember trying to read what was daubed on the door. Then an upstairs window was flung open, and I could hear him again, half laughing, half sobbing. I got up and

went down the street: he leant out of the window and shouted after me.

I was terrified that he might follow me, to some lighted, crowded tube station, still laughing and shouting. He'd been expecting that accident all evening; he'd been waiting all evening for it.

For a couple of weeks after that, a thin, surly ghost, he haunted me through the city. I kept imagining him on escalators, staring bitterly through the dirty glass at the breasts of the girls trapped in the advertisement cases; a question mark made of cynical and lonely ectoplasm.

Why he chose to live in squalor; why he had shouted 'You aren't the first, Egerton, and you won't be the bloody last!' as I fled past the broken milk machines and dreary frontages of his street; how he - or anyone - could have predicted the incident of the last bottle: all questions I had never expected to have answered, since I intended to avoid him like the plague if I ever caught sight of him again. I had four stitches put into my hand.

Then the Chamonix climbing-school post I had been waiting for came free, and I forgot him in the subsequent rush of preparation.

He stayed forgotten during a decade which ended for me - along with a lot of other things - on a stiffish overhang some way up the Dru, in a wind I can still feel on sleepless nights, like a razor at the bone.

When I left Chamonix, I could still walk (many can't after the amputation of a great toe), but I left counting only losses. The English were just then becoming unpopular on the Continent - but I returned to Britain more out of the lairing instinct of a hurt animal than as a response to some fairly good-humoured jostling outside Snell's sports shop, I simply couldn't stand to be in the same country as the Alps.

At home, I took a job in the English department of a crowded comprehensive school in Wandsworth; hobbled round classrooms for a year or so, no more bored than the children who had to sit day after day in front of me; while on Saturday mornings I received, at the Hampstead hospital, treatment for the lingering effect of the frost-bite on my fingers and remaining toes.

I found quickly that walking returned to me something of what I'd lost to a bit of frayed webbing and a twelve-hour Alpine night. During the long vacations that are the sole reward of the indifferent teacher, I rediscovered the Pennines, the Grampians, Snowdonia -and found that while Capel Curig and Sergeant Man are no substitute for the the Aiguille Verte group, I could at least recapture something of what I'd felt there in Cambridge days and before. I walked alone, despite the lesson of the Dru (which I am still paying for in a more literal way: French mountain rescue is efficient, but it can cost you twenty years of whatever sort of life you have to to you: up there, many people pray *not* to be taken off the mountain); and I discouraged that obsessive desire to converse which seems to afflict hikers.

It was on one of these holidays that I heard next from Lyall.

I was staying in the 'Three Peaks' district north and west of Settle, and beginning to find its long impressionistic sweeps of moorland arduous and unrewarding. Lyall's letter caught up with me after a day spent stumping half-heartedly over Scales Moore in the kind of warm drizzle only Yorkshire can produce. I was sufficiently browned-off on returning, I recall, to assassinate a perfectly good pair of boots by leaving them too long on top of Mrs. Bailey's kitchen stove.

So the surge of sentiment which took hold of me when I recognized Lyall's miserly handwriting may be put down to this: I was soaked to the skin, and receptive.

The letter had been forwarded from Chamonix (which led me to wonder if he'd been as drunk as he seemed on the

night of the accident – or as indifferent), and again from my digs in Wandsworth: a round trip of absurd length for something which bore a Westmorland postmark. That in itself was curious; but it was the contents that kept me some time from my shepherd's pie.

It seemed that Lyall's maiden ladies had finally succumbed, within two months of one another and despite all that Bath could do, to the inroads of heart-disease; leaving him - 'Almost as an afterthought,' as he described it, 'among two reams of sound advice -' a property in the Langdale Valley. He had nothing good to say of the place, but was 'hard up' and couldn't afford to sell it. He had 'funked' his personnel officership in London because the place had begun to 'stink of appeasement' - an apparently political comment I couldn't unravel, although by now, like all of us, I knew a little more about the aims of the Patriotic Front. He had married: this, I found almost incredible.

He suggested with a sort of contemptuous bonhomie that if I was 'tired of grubbing about on the Continental muck-heap', I might do an old friend the favour of dropping by to see him.

There was something else there; he was his usual mixture of cold formality and old colloquialisms; 'It's not much to ask' and 'Please yourself of course' were there; but underneath it all I sensed again was the desperation I had witnessed in that squalid flat twelve or thirteen years before - a horrified sense of his own condition, like a sick man with a mirror. And his last sentence was in the form of an admission he had, I'm quite sure, never in his life made before:

'Since you seem to like that sort of mucking about,' he finished, 'I thought we might walk up some of those precious hills of yours together. It's what I need to cheer me up.'

That, tempered no doubt by a twin curiosity as to the nature of his inheritance and the temperament of his unnamed wife, decided me. I packed my rucksack that night, and in the morning left Mrs. Bailey's inestimable

boarding house to its long contemplation of Ingleborough Common. Why I was so quick to respond to him, I don't know: and if I'd suspected one half of the events that were to follow my decisions, I would have been content with any amount of rain, moss and moorland.

Ingleborough Hill itself is a snare and a delusion, since a full third of its imposing height is attained by way of an endless gentle slope bare of interest and a punishment to the ankles: but that morning it thrust up into the weather like a warning – three hundred million years of geological time lost without trace in the unconformity between its base and its flat summit, from which the spectre of the brigand Celt chuckles down at that of his bemused, drenched Roman foe.

The Ambleside bus was empty but for a few peaky, pinch-faced children in darned pullovers and cracked shoes. Their eyes were large and austere and dignified, but for all that they taunted the driver unmercifully until they spilled out to ravage the self-involved streets of Kendal, leaving him to remark, 'It don't bother the kids, though, does it?' It didn't seem to bother him much, either. He was a city man, he went on to explain, and you had to admit things were easier out here.

In the thirty or so miles that separate Inglelton from Ambleside, geomorphology takes hold of the landscape and gives it a cruel wrench; and the moorland – where a five-hour walk may mean, if you are lucky, a vertical gain of a few hundred feet – gives way to a mass of threatening peaks among which for his effort a man may rise two thousand feet in half a mile of forward travel. If I saw the crowding, the steepness, of those hills as Alpine, it may be said that the memory dulls in proportion to the wound's ripening, no more.

The weather, too, is prone to startling mutation in that journey between Yorkshire and Westmorland, and I found the Langdales stuporous under a heat wave of a week's

standing (it works, as often as not, the other way round). Ambleside was lifeless. Being too early for the valley bus, and tiring finally of Frank Davies' display window, I decided to walk to Lyall's 'property'.

Heat vibrated from the greenstone walls of the new cottages at Skelwith Bridge, and the Force was muted. A peculiar diffused light hung over the fellsides, browning the haunted fen; Elterwater and Chapel were quiet, deserted; the sky was like brass. I had some conversation with a hard-eyed pony in the paddock by the Co-op forecourt when I stopped to drink a can of mineral water; but none with the proprietor, who was languid even among the cool of his breakfast cereals and string.

Outside Chapel I took to the shade of the trees and discovered a dead hare, the flies quite silent and enervated as they crawled over its face; a little further on, in the dark well of shadow at the base of the drystone, a motionless adder, eyeless and dried up. The valley had undergone some deterioration in the fifteen years since I had last seen it: shortly after I got my first sight of Bowfell crags and Mickleden (the Rosset Gill path a trembling vertical scar in the haze), I came up the rusting corpse of a motor car that had run off the difficult narrow road and into the beck.

Here and there, drystone scattered in similar incidents simply lay in the pasture, white clumps infested by nettles, like heaps of skulls; and when I came finally to the address Lyall had given me, I found the fellside below Raw Pike blackened up to the five hundred foot line by fire. I didn't know then what I began to suspect later; I saw it all in terms of the children on the Ambleside bus, the price of bacon Wandsworth – symptomatic of another kind of disorder.

And none of that prepared me for Lyall's 'property', a low shambling affair of local stone, facing directly on to the road; the main cottage having two rooms on each floor, and a couple of ancillary buildings leaning up against it as if they would prefer not to but had no choice.

It was amazingly dilapidated. Much of the glass at the front had been replaced by inaccurately-cut oblongs of hardboard; something seemed to have split out of one of the upper windows to dry as an unpleasant brown smear on the stone. The barn roofs sagged, and wanted slates. Uncovered rafters are an agony and here crude patches of corrugated iron did little to mitigate it. One corner of the cottage had been battered repeatedly by confused tourists returning at night from the pubs of Ambleside to the National Trust camp site at the head of the valley; the same fire that had wasted the fern on the the slope above had charred and cracked it; small stones and mortar made a litter of the road.

I untied the binder twine that fastened the gate and wandered round, knocking shyly on doors and calling out. The valley, bludgeoned into stillness by the sun, gave back lethargic echoes.

Road-walking tires my mutilated foot quite quickly. I keep a stick clipped to my pack where an ice axe would normally go, and try to have as little recourse to it as possible: the first two miles had forced it in me that day. I knocked down a few nettles with it, watched the sap evaporate. Two or three minute figures were working their way slowly down the Band, heat and light resonating ecstatically from the 2,900-foot contour behind the,. I sat on an upturned water trough, blinking, and cursing Lyall for his absence.

I'd been there for perhaps a quarter of an hour, wondering if I could hear the valley bus, when he came out of the house, swirling dirty water round an enamel bowl.

'Good God!' he exclaimed sarcastically, and the stuff in the bowl slopped down the front of his trousers. 'the famous Alpinist deigns to visit.' He shot the water carelessly into the nettles. 'Why the hell didn't you knock, Egerton? Shy?' I had the impression that he'd been watching me ever since I arrived. It wouldn't have been beyond him.

'You'd better come in,' he said, staring off into the distance, 'now you're here.'

The intervening years had made a parody of himself – lined and raw, all bone and raging, unconscious self-concern; he'd developed a stoop, a 'dowager's hump', during his London days, a small burn on his neck seemed to be giving him trouble, and he kept his head at a constant slight angle to ease the inflammation caused by his collar. He remembered I was there, nodded at my stick. An old cruelty heliographed out like the light from the peaks.

'Your fine mountaineering cronies won't be so interested in you now, then? Not that I'd have thought that thing stopped you buying their beer.'

It may have been true. I honestly hadn't thought of it until then. 'I've learned to live with it,' I said, as lightly as I could.

He paused in the doorway – Lyall always walked ahead – and looked me up and down. 'You don't know the half of it, Egerton,' he said. 'You never will.' Then sharply: 'Are you coming in, or not?' the crags of Bowfell broadcast their heat across Mickleden, and the Pikes gave it back like a thin, high song of triumph.

What the outer dilapidation of the cottage led me to expect, I don't know: but it was nothing to what I found inside; and despite all that has happened since it still unnerves me to think of that place.

Plaster had fallen from the ceiling of the grim cubby-hole of a kitchen, and still lay on the cracked tile floor; an atrocious wallpaper meant to represent blond Swedish panelling, put up by the maiden ladies or one of their tenants in an attempt to modernize, bellied slackly off the walls. In the living room there was only plaster, and one wall had actually fissured enough to admit a thin, wandering line of sunlight – just as well, since the windows let in very little. Across this tenuous wafer of illumination, motes danced madly; and the place stank.

All the furniture was scarred and loose-jointed. Everywhere, objects: table-lamps, ashtrays and paltry little ornaments of

greenstone: and nothing whole. Everything he owned had become grubby and tired and used in a way that only time uses things, so that it looked as if it had been broken thirty years before: a litter of last month's paperbacked thrillers, spilling with broken spines and dull covers and an atmosphere of the second-hand shop from the bookcases; gramophone records underfoot, scratched and warped and covered in bits of dried food from the dinner plates, with their remains of week-old meals, scattered over the carpet.

It was as if some new shift of personality, some radical escalation of his *morgue* and his bitterness, had coated everything about him with a grease of hopelessness and age. I was appalled: and he must have sensed it, because he grinned savagely and said:

'Don't twitch your nose like that, Egerton. Sit down, if you can find something that won't offend your lilywhite bum.' But he must have regretted it almost immediately -making tea with an air of apology that was the nearest he ever came to the real thing, he admitted, 'I don't know what I'm doing in this hole. I don't seem to be any better off than I was.' He had got a job correcting publishers' proofs, but it gave him nothing. 'Not even much of a living.' While I drank my tea, he stared at the floor.

I got nothing but the weather from him for about half an hour. Then he said suddenly: 'I haven't seen - what was his name? - *Oxlade* - lately. You remember him. The guitarist.'

I was astonished. Probably the last time either of us had seen Oxlade was at Cambridge, just before he went down in the middle of his year to sing with some sort of band; and then Lyall had loathed the man even more than the music, if that were possible.

I chuckled embarrassedly. All I could think of to say was, 'No, I suppose not.' This threw him into a temper.

'Christ, Egerton,' he complained, 'I'm doing my bit. You might join in. We've got little enough in common -'

'I'm sorry,' I began, 'I -'

“You’ve brought some bloody funny habits home with you, I must say.’ He was silent again for a moment, hunched forward in his seat looking at something between his feet. He raised his eyes and said quietly: ‘We’re stuck with each other, Egerton. You need me again now. That’s why you came crawling back here.’ This with a dreadful flatness of tone.

I looked for my rucksack. ‘There’s a place where I can camp further up the valley,’ I told him stiffly; perhaps because I suspected he was correct.

We were both on our feet when a large vehicle drew up in the road outside, darkening the room further and filling it with a smell of dust and diesel oil; airbrakes hissed. It was the valley bus, and from it stepped Lyall’s wife. Lyall, tensed in the gloom, seemed to shrug a little – we both welcomed the interruption. ‘Look, Egerton- ‘ he said.

He went to let her in.

She was a tall, haggard woman, ten or even fifteen years older than him and wearing a headscarf tied in a strangely dated fashion. Her legs were swollen, and one of them was bandaged below the knee. From under the headscarf escaped thin wisps of brownish hair, framing a quiet, passive face. They greeted one another disinterestedly; she nodded briefly at me, her lips a thin line, and went immediately into the kitchen, swaying a little as if suffering from the heat. She was carrying two huge shopping bags.

‘You didn’t tell me we’d run out of coffee,’ she called. When she returned, it was to throw a couple of paperbacks on the floor in front of him. ‘There weren’t any papers,’ she said. ‘Only the local one.’ She went upstairs, and I didn’t see her again that day. Lyall hadn’t introduced her, and I don’t think he ever told me her name.

I didn’t want to stay, but he insisted. ‘Forget all that,’ he said. Later, he opened some cans into a saucepan. While we ate, I stuck to Cambridge, the safe topic, and was glad to see his customary sense of the ridiculous steadily replacing the

earnestness with which he'd introduced the subject of Oxlade. Afterwards, 'Let me do the washing up,' I offered: and so cleared enough floor space to unroll my sleeping bag. Nobody had unpacked the shopping; I couldn't coax more than a trickle from the kitchen taps. Lyall looked cynically on.

After he had gone to bed, I heard them arguing in tight suppressed voices, The sound carried all over the house - hypnotic but meaningless. The darkness was stuffy and electrical, and I hadn't got rid of the smell.

They were up and sparring covertly over some domestic lapse before I got out of my sleeping bag the following morning - the woman throwing things round the sink, Lyall prowling restlessly out into the garden and back again. If my presence had acted as a brake the night before, it was clearly losing its effect; by the time breakfast was ready, they were nagging openly at one another over the eggs. I would have been more embarrassed if the argument had not been over who was to unpack yesterday's shopping.

'I emptied the bloody Elsan yesterday,' said Lyall defensively. 'You do the shopping, not me.'

'For God's sake who eats it?'

I drank some reconstituted orange juice and bent my head over my plate. The woman laughed a bit wildly and retreated into the kitchen. ' "For God's sake who *eats* it?" ' mimicked Lyall, ignoring me. There was a sudden sharp intake of breath. A moment later she reappeared, holding up her left hand. Blood was trickling slowly down the wrist.

'I'm sorry,' she said desperately. 'I cut it on a tin-lid. I couldn't help it.'

'Oh, *Christ!*' shouted Lyall. He smashed his fist down on the table, jumped to his feet and stalked out.

She looked bemusedly after him. 'Where are you going?' she called.

The cut was a ragged lip running across the base of her thumb, shallow but unpleasant. Worried by the grey tinge to

her sallow, ageing face, I made her sit down while I rummaged through the place looking for some sort of dressing. In the end I had to raid my pack for a bit of plaster. When I got back to her she was slumped head-down on the table, her thin bony shoulders trembling. I saw to her hand, wishing Lyall would come back. While I was doing it, she said:

‘You wonder why I stay here, don’t you?’

The palm of her hand was cross-hatched with other, older scars. I might have been tempted to chuckle at the thought of those two sour accident-prones, trapped together in their crumbling backwater and taking miserable revenges on one another, if I hadn’t recollections of my own – chilly images of London in late autumn, the pall of sodium light outside Lyall’s poky rooms, the last bottle of beer.

‘Lyall’s hard to live with,’ I temporized. I didn’t want her confidences, any more than I wanted his. ‘At Cambridge-’

She took hold of my wrist and squeezed it with a queer fervour. ‘It’s because he needs someone.’ I shrugged. She hung on. ‘I love him, you know,’ she said challengingly. I tried to free my wrist. ‘So do you,’ she pressed. ‘You could be anywhere but here, but you’re his best friend-’

‘Look,’ I said angrily, ‘you’re making this very difficult. Do you want your hand bandaged or not?’ And when she simply stared: ‘Lyall just invited me to stay here. We knew each other at Cambridge, that’s all. Hasn’t he told you that?’

She shook her head. ‘No.’ Colour had come back into her face. ‘He needs help. I made him write to you. He thinks-’ Her mouth thinned; she seemed to withdraw. ‘Let him tell you himself.’ She looked down at her hand. ‘Thank you,’ she said formally.

I spent the rest of the day sitting on the water trough, staring out across the valley at quite another range of hills and wondering who I’d meet if I went to one of the hotels for a drink. At about mid-day she came out of the house, squinting into the sunlight.

‘I’m sorry about this morning,’ she said. I muttered something, and drew her attention to a hawk of some kind hanging in the updraught over Raw Pike. She glanced at it impatiently. ‘I don’t know anything about birds. I was in social work.’ She made a vague motion that took in the whole valley, the hot inverted bowl of the sky. ‘Sometimes I blame this place, but it isn’t that.’ She had come out to say something else, but I gave her no encouragement. Perhaps I should have done. ‘Do you want any lunch?’ she said.

Lyall returned with the valley bus.

‘I suppose she’s been talking to you,’ he said. He avoided my eyes. A little bit disgusted by the whole thing, I walked up to the New Dungeon Ghyll and spent the evening drink beer. The place was full of tourists who’d been running up and down Mill Gill all day in tennis shoes, making the rest of us look like old men. When I got back, Lyall and his wife were in bed, the eternal dull complaint rising and falling soporifically through the cottage. I was half asleep when the woman suddenly shouted:

‘I’m twenty-five years old! *Twenty-five years!* What’s happening? What’s happening to me?’

After that, I got up and paced around until dawn, thinking.

Heat pumped down the valley from the secret fastnesses of Flat Crag, from the dry fall at Hell Ghyll; up in the high gullies, the rock sang with it. Further down, the hanging Langdale oakwoods were sapless, submissive – heat had them by the throat. A sense of imminence filled the unlovely living room of the Lyall cottage, reeked on the stairs, fingered out from the bedroom like ectoplasm from a medium. Lyall took to staring for hours at the crack in the wall, hands clasped between his knees. His wife was quiet and tense. Her despairing cry in the dark still hung between them.

Into this strange stasis or prostration, like a low, insistent voice, a thousand small accidents introduced themselves:

the insect bite, the hand slipping on the can-opener, a loss of balance on the stair – cuts, rashes, saucepans dropped, items lost or broken; a constant, ludicrous, nerve-wracking communication from the realm of random incidence. For half a day the kitchen taps refused to give water of any sort, then leaked a slow, rusty liquor even when turned off; four slates fell from the roof in an afternoon of motionless air; Lyall's wife suddenly became allergic to the sun, and walked about disfigured.

Lyall's response to these events was divided equally between irritation and apathy. He brooded. Several times he took me aside as if to broach some mutually embarrassing subject, and on each occasion failed. I couldn't help him: the raging contempt of his Cambridge days, applied with as much rigour to his own motives as to those of others, was by now a memory. Out in one of the barns, cutting a piece of zinc to mend the roof, he said, 'Don't you ever regret your childhood, Egerton?'

I didn't think I did, I didn't think childhood meant much after a certain age. I had to shout this over the screech of the hacksaw. He watched my lips for a while, like a botanist with an interesting but fairly common specimen, then stopped working.

'In Bath, you know,' he said, brushing his lank hair off his face, 'it was all so clear-cut. A sort of model of the future, with neat sharp edges, English, Classics, Cambridge, and after that, God knows what – the Foreign Service, if the old dears had a thought in their heads.' He laughed bitterly. 'I had to play the piano.' He held up the hand with the dirty ball of bandage on the thumb. 'With this.' He looked disgusted for a moment, but when he turned away, his eyes were watering.

'I was really rather good at it.'

The picture of the young Lyall, shut in some faded Regency drawing room with a piano (his limbs protruding amazed and raw from the tubular worsted shorts and red blazer his

maiden ladies would doubtless have insisted upon), was ludicrous enough. He compounded it by yearning, 'We never deserve the future, Egerton. They never tell us what it's going to be like.'

When I tried to laugh him out of it, he went angrily off with, 'You might show a bit of interest in someone else's problems. It'd take your mind off your precious bloody foot.'

He came back to the house late, with a half-empty bottle of brandy. God knows what fells he had been staggering across, red-faced and watery-eyed, his shirt pulled open to the waist. His wife and I had been listening to Bach; when he entered the room, she glanced at me and went straight upstairs. Lyall cocked his head, laughed, kicked out at the radiogram. 'All that bloody Lovelace we had, eh?' he said, making some equation I couldn't follow.

'I don't know what I am, Egerton,' he went on, pulling a chair up close to mine. 'You don't, either. We'll never know the half of it,' he said companionably. 'Eh?' he was bent on baring his soul (or so I imagined): yearning for the emotional storm I was equally determined to avoid – Cambridge, recrimination, the maudlin reaffirmation of interdependence. 'Have a bloody drink, Egerton,' he demanded.

'I think you ought to have some coffee,' I said. 'I'll make you some.' I went into the kitchen.

'You bloody prig,' he said quietly.

When I went back, he had gone upstairs. I listened for a moment, but could hear nothing. In the end I drank the coffee myself and went to bed. That night was one of vast heat and discomfort: the rancid smell I had noticed on my first day in the cottage oozed from the furniture as if the heat were rendering from the stuffing of the cushions some foul grease no scrubbing brush could touch; my sleeping bag was sticky and intolerable, and no amount of force would move the windows, I lay for hours in an exhausted

doze poisoned by nightmares and incoherent, half-conscious fantasies.

Groaning from upstairs disturbed that dreary reverie. A sleepy moan, the dull thump of feet on the bedroom floor; something fell over. There was a moment of perfect silence, then Lyall saying loudly, 'Oh Christ, I'm *sorry* then.'

Somebody came stumbling down through the thick, stale darkness of the staircase. My watch had stopped.

'Egerton?' called Lyall, bumping about in the dark.

'Egerton? Egerton?'

He sounded like a dead child discovering that eternity is some buzzing, languorous dream of bath. I heard him cough once or twice into the sink; then the brandy bottle gurgled, fell on to the kitchen tiles and was smashed. 'Oh God,' whispered Lyall. 'Do you ever have nightmares, Egerton? Real ones, where you might just as well be awake?' I felt him coming closer through that ancient velvet darkness. 'All this is my fault, you know.' He swallowed loudly. He tried to touch my shoulder.

'You could get another job,' I suggested cautiously, moving away. 'The proof reading doesn't seem to make you much.'

'When we came here, this place was perfect. Now look at it.' There was a pause, as he scratched irritably about for the light switch. He failed to find it. 'It's a slum, *and I'm doing it*. What difference can a job make?'

'Look,' I said, 'I don't quite understand.' I couldn't bear the confines of the sleeping bag any more but out there in the dark I was as lost as Lyall. I perched on what I hoped was the arms of a chair. 'You'd better tell me about,' I invited, since seemed to be no alternative; and added, feeling disgusted with myself even as I did it, 'old chap.' I needn't have worried. He barely noticed.

'Everything I touch falls to pieces,' he said. 'it's been happening since I was a kid.' Then, with a dull attempt at dignity - 'it's held me back, of course: I'd have had a First if it hadn't been for that bloody bicycle; the last job went

down the chute with the office duplicator; I can't even get on a bus without it smashing into something.'

'Everyone feels like that at some time or another, I said. "In the Alps-'

'Bugger the Alps, Egerton!' he hissed. "Listen to me for once!'

His mind was a black drain, it was an attic with a trap full of dry, eviscerated mice. In it he'd stored up every incident of his childhood - a nursery *faux pas*, a blocked lavatory bowl, a favorite animal run down in the street - making no distinction between the act and the accident, between the cup and the lip. With a kind of quiet hysteria in his voice, he detailed every anticlimax of his maturity - each imagined slight carefully catalogued, each spillage, each coin lost among the rubbish beneath a basement grid; every single inkblot gathered and sorted into a relentless, unselective system of culpability.

It was nonsensical and terrifying. Typists, tutors and maiden ladies, his victims and pursuers, haunted him through that attic; / haunted him, it seemed, for he ended with: 'It was me that cut your hand in London, Egerton, not the bottle. I couldn't help it. Something flows out of me, and I can't control it any more-

'Look at this place. Look at it!' And he began to sob.

A dim, cobwebby light was filtering through the remaining panes of glass, greying his face, his scrawny, hopeless body. I have a horror of confession: I was angry with him for burdening me, and at the same time full of an awful empty pity; what could I have said to him? - That I thought he was mad? Self concern makes us all mad. All I could do then was pat his shoulder reassuringly.

'Look,' I said, 'it's getting light, Lyall. Let's both have a bit of sleep. We can work it out later. You've obviously got a bit depressed, that's all. You'll feel better now.'

He stiffened. One moment he was blubbering helplessly, the next he had said quite clearly, 'I might have known.'

You've had it easy all your life, you bloody pompous bastard-'

I got to my feet. I thought of Chamonix, and the razor of wind that shaves the Aiguilles. I should have kept my temper; instead, I simply felt relieved to have a reason for losing it. I waited for a moment before saying, 'Nobody paid my way through Cambridge, Lyall.' Then, deliberately, 'For God's sake pull yourself together. You're not a child anymore. And you never were a Jonah – just a bloody great bag of self-pity.'

He was hitting me the moment I turned away. I fell over the chair, upset more by the things he was screaming than by his clumsy attempts to re-enact some schoolyard fight of twenty years before. 'Christ, Lyall, don't be silly!' I shouted. I got the chair between us, but he roared and knocked it away. I made a grab for windmilling arms; found myself backed into a corner. I got a knock on my check which stung my pride. 'You little fucker,' I said, and hit him in the stomach. He fell down, belching and coughing.

I pulled him back into the room and stood over him. His wife discovered us there in our underpants – too old to be scrabbling about on a greasy carpet, too white and ugly to be anything but foolish, 'What's the matter?' she pleaded, befuddled with sleep and staring at my mutilated foot. Lyall said something filthy. 'You'd better look after the baby,' I told her viciously. And then that that old terrible boyhood cry of triumph. 'He shouldn't start things he can't finish.'

I got dressed and packed my rucksack, Lyall sniffing and moaning throughout. As I left, the woman was kneeling over him, wiping his runny nose – but she was gazing up at me. 'No!' I said. 'No more. Not from me. He needs a bloody doctor-' Turning in the doorway: 'Why did you have to lie to him about your age? Couldn't *you* get anybody, either?' I felt a little sick.

It might have ended there, I might have taken away the simplest and most comforting solution to the enigma of Lyall, if I hadn't decided that while (for the second, or, now I could admit it, the third time in my life) I never wanted to see him again, I didn't intend to let him ruin the week or so of holiday I had left to me. It was unthinkable to return to Wandsworth with only that sordid squabble to remember through the winter.

So instead of catching the bus back to Ambleside I moved up the valley to the National Trust site, put up my little Ultimate tent, and for a week at least had some recompense for my stay beneath Raw Pike; pottering about in the silent, stone-choked ghylls of Oxendale, where nobody seems to go; drowsing among the glacial moraines of Stake pass, where dragonflies clatter mournfully through the brittle reed-stems and the path tumbles down its spur into the Langstrath like an invitation; watching the evening climbers on Gimmer, coloured motes against the archaic face of the rock, infinitely slow-moving and precarious.

It was a peculiar time. The heat-wave, rather than abating, merely consolidated its grip and moved into its third week, during which temperatures of a hundred degrees were recorded in Keswick. Dead sheep dotted the fells like *roches moutonnees*, and in dry gullies gaped silently over bleached pebbles. A middle-aged couple on a coach-outing for the blind wandered somehow on to the screes at Wastwater, to be discovered on the 1,700 foot line by an astonished rescue team and brought down suffering from heat prostration and amnesia. Mickleden Beck diminished to a trickle – at the dam beneath Stickle Breast, exhausted birds littered the old waterline, staring passively up at the quivering peaks.

The camp site was empty, and curiously lethargic. A handful of climbers from Durham University had set up in one field, some boys on a Outward Bound exercise in the other: but there were none of the great blue-and-orange canvas palaces which normally spread their wings beneath Side

Peak all summer long, none of the children who in a moment of boredom trip over your guy lines on their way to pee secretly in the brook. After dark each night, a few of us clustered round the warden's caravan to hear the ten o'clock national news, while heat-lightning played round Pike o' Stickle then danced gleefully away across Martcrag Moor. Under a fat moon, the valley was greenish and ingenuous, like an ill-lit diorama.

Despite my anger – or perhaps because of it – I couldn't exorcise the Lyalls, and their dreamlike embrace of inadvertency and pain continued to fascinate me. I even broke an excursion to Blea Rigg and Codale to sit on the fellside for half an hour and muse over the cottage, small and precise in the valley; but up there it was uncommunicative. One of the barn roofs had sagged; there was fresh rubble in the road; the whole place had an air of abandonment and stupefaction in the heat. Where was Lyall? – Prowling hungrily through the Ambleside bookshops, haggling sourly over the price of a papercover thriller now that he couldn't get *The Times*?

And the woman – what elusive thoughts, what trancelike afternoons, staring out into the sunlight and the nettles? Her calm was mysterious. Lyall was destroying her, but she stayed; she was a liar – but there was something dreadfully apt in her vision, her metaphor of entropy. If this seems a detached, academic attitude to her essential misery, it was not one I was able to hold for long. The heat wave mounted past bearing; the valley lay smashed and submissive beneath it; and eight days after my brawl with Lyall, on a night when events human and geological seemed to reach almost consciously towards union, I was forced from the speculative view.

Sleep was impossible. Later than usual, we gathered round the warden's radio. But for the vibrant greenish haze in the sky, it might have been day. Sweat poured off us. Confused

by the evil half-light and the heat rolling out of Mickleden, a pair of wrens were piping miserably and intermittently from the undergrowth by the brook, where a thousand insects hung in the air over an inch of slow water.

With oil-tariff revelations compromising the minority government, public anger mounting over the French agricultural betrayal, and the constant spectre of the Patriotic Front demanding proportional representation from the wings of an already shaky parliament, the political organism had begun to look like some fossil survivor of another age. That night, it seemed to wake up suddenly to its situation; it thrashed and bled in the malarial air of the twentieth century, and over the transistor we followed its final throes; the government fell, and something became extinct in Britain while we slapped our necks to kill midges.

After the announcement a group of the Durham students hung uneasily about in the wedge of yellow light issuing from the warden's door, speechless and shrugging. Later, they probed the bleeding gum cautiously, in undertones, while the warden's wife made tea and the radio mumbled unconvincingly into the night. They seemed reluctant to separate and cross the empty site to empty tents, alone.

It was one of them who, turning eventually to go, drew our attention to a curious noise in the night - a low, spasmodic bubbling, like some thick liquid simmering out of a hole in the ground. We cocked our heads, laughed at him, and he deferred shyly to our judgment that it was only the brook on the stones beneath the little bridge. But shortly afterwards it came again, closer: and then a third time, not twenty yards away across the car-park.

'There's someone out there,' he said wonderingly. He was a tall, wispy lad with a thin yellow beard and large feet, his face young and concerned and decent even in that peculiar beryline gloom. When we laughed at him again, he said gently. 'I think I'll go and have a look, though.' The gate creaked open, we heard his boots on the gravel. With and

edgy grin, one of his friends explained to use. 'Too much ale tonight.' Silence.

Then, 'Oh my God,' he said in a surprised voice. "You'd better come and do something," he called, and gave himself suddenly to a fit of choking and coughing. We found him sitting on the gravel with his head between his knees. He had vomited extensively. On the ground in front of him lay Lyall's wife.

'How did she walk?' he whispered. 'Oh, how did she walk?' He wrapped his arms round his knees and rocked himself to and fro.

She was hideously burnt. Her clothes were inseparable from the charred flesh in which they had become embedded; one ruined eye glared sightlessly out of a massive swelling of the facial tissue; plasma leaked from the less damaged areas, and she stank of the oven. Whatever fear or determination had driven from under the shadow of Raw Pike now kept her conscious, staring passively upwards from her good eye, her body quivering gently with shock.

'Egerton,' she said, 'Egerton, Egerton, Egerton-'

I knelt over her.

'-Egerton, Egerton-'

'Someone get that bloody Land Rover across here,' said the warden thickly.

'What happened?' I said. She lay like a blackened log, staring up at the sky. She shuddered convulsively. 'Where's Lyall?'

'-Egerton, Egerton, Egerton, Egerton-'

"I'm here.'

But she was dead.

I staggered away to squirt up a thin, painful stream of bile. The warden followed me. 'Did she know you?' he said.

'Where did she come from? What happened?' I wiped my mouth. How could I tell? She had come to get help from me, but not for herself. I hang on to that thought, even now. With some idea of protecting Lyall, at least until I could get to

him, I said, 'I've never seen her before in my life. Look, I've got go. Excuse me.'

I felt him staring after me. The Land Rover was manoeuvring nervously round the car-park, but now they had nowhere to take her. The boy from Durham was asking himself, over and over again, 'How did she *get* here?' He appealed to his friends, but they were shaken and grey-faced, and they didn't know what to say.

It was past midnight when I left the campsite. An almost constant flicker of heat-lightning lent a macabre formality to the lane, the hills and the drystone walls – like subjects in some steel engraving or high-contrast photograph, they were perfectly defined but quite unreal. At Middlefell Farm the lights were all out. Some sheep stared at me from a paddock, their sides heaving and their eyes unearthly.

I lurched along under that hot green sky for forty minutes, but it seemed longer. Like a fool, I kept looking for signs of the woman's blind, agonized flight: had she fallen here, and dragged herself a little way? – And there, had it seemed impossible to drive the quivering insensate hulk a yard further? I was brought up short, stupid and horrified, by every smear of melted tar on the road; yet I ignored the only real event of the journey.

I had stopped for a moment to put my back against a drystone and massage the cramped calf of my left leg. A curlew was fluting tentatively from the deep Gothic cleft of Dungeon Ghyll. I had been gazing vacantly down the valley for perhaps half a minute, trying to control my erratic breathing, when the sky over Ambleside seemed to *pulse* suddenly, as if some curious shift of energy states had taken place. Simultaneously, the road lurched beneath me.

I felt it distinctly: a brief, queasy swaying motion. And when I touched the wall behind me, a faint tremor was in it, a fading vibration. I was dazed through lack of proper sleep; I was obsessed – and knew it – by the grim odyssey of Lyall's

wife; I put the tremor down to dizziness, and attributed that strange transitional flicker of air to a flare of lightning somewhere over Troutbeck, a flash partially occluded by the mass of the fells between. But when I moved on, the peculiar hue of the sky was brighter; and although the event seemed to have no meaning at the time, it was to prove of central significance in the culminating nightmare.

The smoke was visible from quite a long way off, drifting filmy and exhausted up the fellside, clinging to the spongy ash and shrivelled bracken stems of that previous fire, to be trapped by an inversion about a hundred feet below Raw Pike and spread out in a thin cloudbank the colour of watered milk.

Lyall's cottage was ruined. Both barns were down in a heap of lamp-blackened stone, here and there an unconsumed rafter or beam sticking up out of the mess; the roof of the main building had caved in, taking the upper floor with it, so that there remained only a shell full of smoking slates and white soft ash.

It radiated an intense heat, and the odd glowing cinder raced erratically up from it on the updraughts, but the fire *per se* had burnt itself out long before.

The wreckage was curiously uncompact. An explosion, probably of the kitchen gas-cylinders, had flung rubble into the nettle patch; and for some reason most of the face of the building lay in the road.

There among a tangle of smashed window frames and furniture, motionless in contemplation of the wreck and looking infinitely lonely, stood the long, ungainly figure of Lyall. His tweed jacket had gone through at the elbows, his trousers were charred and filthy, and his shoes were falling to pieces, as if he'd been trampling about in the embers looking for something. I began to shout his name long before I reached him. He studied my limping, hasty progress down the road for a moment; then, as I got close, seemed to lose interest.

‘Lyll!’ I called. ‘Are you all right?’

I kicked my way through the rubbish and shook his shoulder. He watched a swirl of ash dance over the deep embers. Something popped and cracked comfortably down in that hot pit. When he faced me, his eyes, red and sore, glowed out of his stubbled, smoke-blackened face with another kind of heat. But his voice was quite inoffensive when he said, ‘Hello Egerton. I didn’t get much stuff out, you see.’ Stacked neatly in the road a few yards off were twenty or thirty charred paperbacks. ‘She came to fetch you, then?’

He stared absently at the ruin. I had expected to find something more than a drowsy child, parching its skin in some reverie over the remains of a garden bonfire. I was sickened. ‘Lyll, you bloody moron!’ I shouted. ‘She’s *dead*!’ He moved his shoulders slightly, stared on. I caught hold of his arm and shook him. He was relaxed, unresistant. ‘Did you send her away in that condition? Are you mad? She was burnt to pieces!’ I might have been talking to myself. ‘What’s been *happening* here?’

When he finally pulled up out of the dry trap of ashes, it was to shake his head slowly and say, ‘What? I don’t know.’ He gaped, he blinked, he whispered, ‘She was getting so old. It was my fault-’ He seemed about to explain something, but never did. That open-mouthed pain, that terrible passive acceptance of guilt, was probably the last glimpse I had of Lyll the human being. Had he, at some point during the dreadful events of that night, actually faced and recognized the corroding power of his self-concern? At the time I thought I understood it all – and standing uselessly amid all that rubble I needed to believe he had.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

At this the inhuman paroxysm of misery and loathing took hold of his swollen, grimy features. ‘Fuck you, Egerton!’ he cried. He threw off my hand. For a second, I was physically afraid and backed away quickly from him. He followed me,

with, 'What's it got to do with you? What's any of it got to do with you?' Then, quieter, 'I can't seem to-'

The spasm passed. He looked down at his blistered hands as if seeing them for the first time. He laughed. His eyes flickered over me, cruel as heat-lightning. 'Bugger off back home, then, Egerton, if you feel like that,' he said. He put his hands in his trouser pockets and stirred the rubble with his toe. 'I didn't break the bloody piano, and I'll tell the old bitch I didn't-' He whirled away and strode off rapidly across the scorched fellside, stopping only to pick up an armful of books and call "I'm sick of all this filthy rubbish anyway.'

Smoke wreathed round him. I saw him turn north and begin to climb.

With this absurd transition into the dimension of height began what must surely be the most extraordinary episode of the entire business. Lyall stalked away from me up the fell. Amazed, I shouted after him. When he ignored me, I could only follow: he may or may not have had suicidal intentions, but he was certainly mad; in either case, if only out of common humanity, I couldn't just stand there and watch him go.

It might have been better if I had.

He made straight for Raw Pike, and then, his torso seeming to drift legless above the pall of white smoke that hung beneath the outcrop, bore west to begin a traverse which took us into the deep and difficult gullies between Whitegill Crag and Mill Gill. Here, he seemed to become lost for a while, and I gained on him.

He blundered about those stony vegetation-choked clefts like a sick animal, trying to scale waterslides or scrape his way up the low but steep rock walls. His shoes had fallen off his feet, and he was leaving a damp, urgent trail. He ignored me if I called his name, but he was quite aware of my presence, and took a patent delight in picking at his emotional scabs, real or imagined, whenever I got close

enough to hear him. His voice drifted eerily down the defiles. The piano seemed to preoccupy him.

'I never broke it,' I heard, in a self-congratulatory tone, then: 'Nowhere near it, Miss,' mumbled as part of a dialogue in which he took both parts. She didn't believe him, of course, and he became progressively more sullen. Later, groping for a handhold three feet above his head, he burst out angrily, 'You can tell him I *won't* be responsible for the bloody things. Staff loss isn't *my* problem.' His hold turned out to be a clump of shallow-rooted heather, which came out when he put his weight on it. He laughed 'Go and lick her arse then-'

In this way, he visited almost every period of his life. He met his wife down by the Thames, in a filthy March wind; later, they whispered to one another at night in his Holloway flat. He conjured up mutual acquaintances from Cambridge, and set them posturing like the dowdy flamingoes they had undoubtedly been. And once my own voice startled me, echoing pompously over the fells as part of some student dispute which must have seemed excruciatingly important at the time, and which I still can't remember.

When he finally broke out on to the east bank of Mill Gill, he stared back at me for a moment as if reassuring himself that I was still there. He even nodded to me, with a sort of grim approval. Then he lurched unsteadily through the bracken to the ghyll itself and dropped his paperbacks into it one by one, looking over his shoulder each time to see if I was watching. He crouched there like a child, studying each bright jacket as it slipped beneath the surface of the water and was whirled away.

His shoulders were moving, but I couldn't tell whether he was laughing or crying.

It was during the latter part of this unburdening that the earth began to shake again – and this time in earnest. I sensed rather than saw that energetic transition of the air. The whole sky pulsed, flickered with lightning, seemed to stabilize. Then, with an enormous rusting noise, the fell

beneath my feet shifted and heaved, lifting itself into a long curved wave which raced away from me up the slopes to explode against the dark rock of Tarn Crag in a shower of small stones and uprooted bracken.

I tottered about, shouting, 'Lyall! Lyall!' until a second, more powerful shock threw me off my feet and sent me rolling twenty or thirty feet down towards the road.

Mill Gill gaped. The last paperback vanished. A groan came up out of the earth. Abruptly, the air was full of loose soil and rock-chippings, mud and spray from the banks of the ghyll. Lyall stared up through it at the throbbing sky; spun round and set off up the path to Stickle Tarn at a terrific rate, his long legs pumping up and down. Rocks blundered and rumbled round him – he brandished his fist at the hills.

'Lyall, for God's sake come back!' I begged, but my voice was sucked away into the filthy air, and all I could see of him was a dim untiring figure, splashing across the ghyll where Tarn Crag blocks the direct route.

I put my head down into the murk and scrambled upward. Black water vomited suddenly down the ghyll, full of dead sheep and matted vegetation. Through the spray of a new waterfall I had a glimpse of Lyall waving his arms about and croaking demented challenges at a landscape that changed even as he opened his mouth. Twice, I got quite close behind him; once, I grabbed his arm, but he only thrashed about and shouted, 'Bugger off home, Egerton!' over the booming of the water.

Five hundred feet of ascent opened up the gully and spread Sickle Tarn before us, the colour of lead: fifty acres of sullen water simmering in its dammed-up glacial bowl. Up there on the 1500-foot line, out of the confines of the ghyll, it was quieter and the earth seemed less agitated. But the damn was cracked; a hot wind rumbled through the high passes and gusted across the cirque; and up out of the black scree

on the far bank of the tarn there loomed like a threat the massive, seamed face of the Borrowdale Volcanics-

Pavey Ark lowered down at us, crawling with boulder slides and crowned with heat-lightning: the highest sheer drop in the Central Fells, four hundred and eighty million years old - impassive, unbending, orogenetic. A constant stream of material was pouring like fine dust from the bilberry terraces at its summit thousand feet above sea level, crushed volcanic agglomerate whirling and smoking across the face; while, down by the water, larger rocks dislodged from the uneasy heights bounced a hundred feet into the air in explosions of scree.

Lyall stood stock-still, staring up at it.

Beside him, the dam creaked and flexed. A ton of water spilled over the parapet and roared away down Mill Gill. He paid it not the slightest attention, simply stood there, drenched and muddy, moving his head fractionally from side to side as he traced one by one the scars of that horrific cliff, like a man following a page of print with his index finger; Great Gully, unclimbable without equipment, Gwynne's Chimney, Little Gully, and, tumbling from the western pinnacle to the base of East Buttress, the long precipitous grooves and terraces of Jack's Rake.

He was looking for a way up.

'Lyall,' I said, 'haven't you come far enough?

He shrugged. Without a word, he set round the margin of the tarn.

I'm convinced that following him further would have done no good: he had been determined on this course perhaps as far back as Cambridge, certainly since his crisis of self-confidence in the cottage. Anyway, my foot had become unbearably painful: It was as much as I could do to catch up with him halfway round the tarn, and, by actually grabbing the tail of his jacket, forcing him to stop.

We struggled stupidly for a moment, tottering in and out of the warm shallows - the Ark towering above us like a

repository of all uncommitted Ordovician time. Lyall disengaged himself and ran off a little way. He put his head on one side and regarded me warily, chest heaving.

Then he nodded to himself, returned, and, keeping well out of my reach, said quite amiably, 'I'm going up, Egerton. It's too late to stop me, you know.' Something detached itself from the cliff and fell into the tarn like a small bomb going off. He spun round, screaming and waving his fist. 'Leave me alone! Fuck off!' He watched the water subside. He showed his teeth. 'Listen, you bastard,' he said quietly: 'Why don't you just chuck yourself in *that*?' And he pointed to the torrent rumbling over the damn and down Mill Gill. 'For all the help you've ever been to me, you might as well-'

He began to walk away. He stopped, tore at his hair, made an apologetic gesture in my direction. His face crumpled, and the Lyall I had beaten up in the living room of his own house looked out of it. 'I can't seem to stop going up, Egerton,' he whispered, 'I can't seem to stop doing it-'

But when I stepped forward, he shook with laughter. 'That got you going, you bloody oaf!' he gasped. And he stumbled off towards the screes.

It really would have done no good to go with him. Once or twice on the the long walk back to the damn, I actually turned and began to follow him again. But it was useless: by then, distance and the Ark had made of him a small mechanical toy. I called for him to wait, but he couldn't have heard me; in the end, I made my way up to the northern slopes of Tarn Crag (I had to cross the damn to do it - I waited for a lull, but even so my feet were in six inches of fast water as I went over, and my skin crawled with every step) and from there watched his inevitable ascent.

He crabbed about at the base of the Great Gully for a while, presumably looking for a way up; when this proved impracticable, he made a high easterly traverse of the screes and vanished into the shadow of East Buttress: to

reappear ten minutes later inching his way up Jack's Rake – an infinitely tiny, vulnerable mote against the face.

I didn't really imagine he would do it. God knows why I chose that moment to be 'sensible' about him. I sat down and unlaced my boots, petulantly determined to see him through what was after all a rather childish adventure, and then say nothing about it when the cliff itself had sent him chastened away. There was so little excuse for this that it seems made now, of course; the Ark was shaking and shifting, the very air about it groaned and rang with heat; St. Elmo's fire writhed along its great humped outline. How on earth I expected him to survive, I don't know.

He was invisible for minutes at a time even on the easy stretch up to the ashtree at the entrance of Rake End Chimney, inundated by that curtain of debris blowing across the sheer walls above him. He tried confusedly to scale the chimney, failed; trudged doggedly on up, the temperature rising as he went. A smell of dust and lightning filled the air. Negotiating the fifty degree slope of the second pitch, he was forced to cling to the rock for nearly half an hour while tons of rubble thundered past him and into the tarn below. He should have been crushed; he must have been injured in some way, for it took him almost as long to complete fifteen yards of fairly simple scrambling along the Easy Terrace.

Perhaps I remembered too late that Lyall was a human being; but from that point on, I could no longer minimize the obsession that had driven him up there. When some internal rupture of the cliff flooded the channels above him and turned the Rake into a high-level drainage culvert, I could hear only that despairing mumble in the cottage at night, the voice of his wife; when he windmilled his arms against the rush of the water, regained his balance and crawled on up, insensate and determined, I bit my lip until it bled. Perhaps it's never too late.

In some peculiar way the Ark too seemed to respond to his efforts two thousand feet up, spidering across the Great

Gully and heading for the summit wall, he moved into quietude; the boulder slides diminished, the cliff stood heavy and passive, like a cow in heat. Down below, on Tarn Crag, the earth ceased to tremble. Stickle Tarn calmed, and lay like a vat of molten beryl, reflecting the vibrant, acid sky; there were no more shadows, and, when I took off my shirt to dip it into the Tarn Crag pool, I felt no movement of the air. Hundreds of small birds were rustling uncomfortably about in the heather; while up above the blind, blunt head of Harrison Stickle, one hawk wheeled in slow, magnificent circles.

Twenty minutes after his successful negotiation of the Great gully intersection, Lyall crossed the summit wall. There I lost him for a short period. What he did there, I have no clue. Perhaps he simply wandered among the strange nodular boulders and shallow rock pools of the region. But if any transition took place, if his sour and ludicrous metaphysic received its final unimaginable blessing, it must have come there, between summit wall and summit cairn, between the cup and the lip, while I fretted and stalked below.

All this aside: suddenly, the peaks about me flared and wavered ecstatically; and he was standing by the cairn-

He was almost invisible: but I can imagine him there, with his arms upraised, his raw wrists poking out of the sleeves of his tweed jacket: no more unengaging or desperate, no stranger than he ever been among the evening mists of Cambridge or the broken milk machines of Holloway: except that, now, static electricity is playing over him like fire, and his mouth is open in a great disgusted shout that reaches me quite clearly through the still, haunted air-

For a moment, everything seemed to pause. The sky broadcast a heat triumphant - a long, high, crystalline song, taken up and echoed by summit after summit, from Wetherlam and the Conistone Old Man, from Scafell Pike and the unbearable resonant fastnesses of Glaramara, never fading. For a moment, Lyall stood transfigured, perched

between his own madness and the madness of an old geography. Then, as his cry died away to leave the cry of the sky supreme, a series of huge cracks and ruptures spread out across the cliff face from beneath his feet; and, with a sound like the tearing of vast lace, the whole immense facade of Pavey Ark began to slide slowly into the tarn beneath.

Dust plumed half a mile into the air; on a mounting roar the cliff, like an old sick woman, fell to its knees in the cirque; the high bilberry terraces poised themselves for a long instant, then, lowering themselves gently down, evaporated into dust. Millions of tons of displaced water smashed the dam and went howling down Mill Gill, crashing from wall to wall; to spill – black and invincible, capped with a dirty grey spume – across the valley and break like a giant sea against the lower slopes of Oak Howe and Side Pike. Before the Ark had finished its weary slide, the valley road was no more, the New Hotel and Side House were rubbish on a long wave – and that pit of ashes, Lyall's house, was extinguished forever.

I watched the ruin without believing it. I remember saying something like, 'For God's sake, Lyall-' Then I turned and ran for my life over the quaking crag, east towards the safety of Blea Rigg and the fell route to an Ambleside I was almost frightened to reach. As I went, an ordinary darkness was filtering across the sky; a cool wind sprang up; and there rain clouds already racing in from the Irish Sea along a stormy front.

Even allowing for the new unreliability of the press, exoteric explanations of the Great Langdale earth movement – activity renewed among the Borrowdale Volcanics after nearly five hundred million years; the unplanned landing of some enormous Russian space probe – seemed ridiculous to me. Beyond the discovery of that poor woman, there were no

witnesses other than myself in the immediate area. Was *Lyall*, then, responsible for the destruction of Pavey Ark?

It seems incredible: and yet, in the face of his own death, insignificant. He carried his own entropy around with him, which makes him seem monstrous, perhaps; I don't know. He believed in an executive misery, and that should be enough for any of us. It hardly matters to me now. Other events swept it away almost immediately.

As I stumbled through the dim, panicky streets of Ambleside in the aftermath of the earthquake, the Patriotic Front was issuing from dusty suburban drill halls and Boy Scout huts all over the country; and by noon England, seventy years too late, was taking her first hesitant but heady steps into this century of violence. Grouped about the warden's radio in the still, stupefied night, we could have guessed at something of the sort. I understand now why the Durham students were so effected: students have suffered more than most as the Front tightens its political grip.

In dreams, I blame *Lyall* for that, too; equate the death of reason with the collapse of Pavey Ark; and watch England crawl past me over and again in the guise of a burnt woman on her desperate journey to the head of a valley that turns out every time to be impassive and arid. But awake I am more reasonable, and I have a job at the new sports shop in Chamonix. It's no hardship to sell other climbers their perlon and pitons – although the younger ones will keep going up alone, against all advice. Like many of the more fortunate refugees I have been allowed to take a limited French nationality; I even have a second-class passport, but I doubt if I shall ever go back.

Walking about the town, I still hate to look up, in case the cruel and naked peaks surprise from between the housetops: but the pain of that wound is at least explicable, whereas *Lyall*–

Everyone who ever met *Lyall* contributed in some small way to his death. It might have been averted perhaps, if, in some

Cambridge mist of long ago, I had only come upon the right thing to say; and I behaved very badly towards him later: but it seems as futile to judge myself on that account as to be continually interpreting and reinterpreting the moment at which I was forced to realize that one man's raw and gaping self-concern had brought down a mountain.

And I prefer to picture Stickle Tarn not as it looked from the 1,600 contour during Lyall's final access of rage and despair, but as I remember it from my Cambridge days and before – a wide, cold pool in the shadow of an ancient and beautiful cliff, where on grey windy days a seabird you never identify seems always to be trawling twenty feet above the water in search of something it probably can't even define to itself.

FIVE

The Orgasm Band

mere soul masturbation

Outside, the heat was oppressive. Somehow, it had managed to crawl down inside him and was stuck there like a dead fish in his throat. Marina Natesby was scouring the pee-stains in the sink with Ajax, her arms red and beefy. Two raw, sun-peeled limbs, flayed shins of ox moving in tandem beneath a line of damp washing. He talked steadily, explaining his adolescent illnesses. And she wearing blue terylene knee-socks. Her legs also were beefy and creased behind the knees, angry red striations. As if demonstrating the slope of a pyramid, he made this gesture frequently: thumbs inward, palms down, taking the hands apart and down in a brief chopping motion, defining pyramids in the air, deriving small trapezoid areas of thought. His hands were square and covered with fine ginger hairs. His right thumbnail had cracked and was held together with Sellotape. Outside, the crowd was oppressive. 'The crowd's

still out there.' 'Yes,' he said, 'but very quiet.' It was important that the crowd stay quiet. He thought, perhaps the dead fish in my throat comes from cigarette-smoking. Certain fish, they have spines that lay in such a way that one can sustain appreciable injury by rubbing them up the wrong way. Like the crowd. After she had finished the sink, she came up to the bed wiping red knuckles on a white towel. Meat on a slab.

on the orgasm band

On the bandstand. It was hot and the $\frac{3}{4}$ bass-line was coming through 800 watts like a prolonged orgasm, the lead-guitar mindless but how potent in histrionic low-fidelity. Mayer alternately sweating and howling and screwing the most incredible little runs from his harmonica, his girlie locks sweat-plastered to his temples. The guitarist hung up quaint harmonic sixths. The audience quite still for fear that movement in the heat might cause them to dissolve. Mayer intoning the Free Association Blues... 'Wait till I put my back in because what I want to feel is drowned in all your spastic musics are my milieu, my Belsen-is-the-place-to-be can't be other than your tambourines hung with human skin, and what I want to see YOU BLIND' (here, he swings at the bassist, dribbling on the Vox audials and scraping his harmonica on the glans of the microphone) 'FUCKER is that penile tone-arm exposed at every fox in the audience is high and damp at the crotch and expiating her vaginity through that lucky tarot-bitch will make it with *you* in the back of the Ford Transit among the broken B-strings like hymens on the dusty floor, with the P.A. connected up to catch the punch-line.' later, he says to Gimp the guitarist, 'I don't know why I still try to communicate. *You weren't quite with me when the bass fused-off.*' 'It was still good.'

i only do it behind my fans

Mayer had some three-and-three quarter ips tapes of the band's first tour. It was a quick way of playing his memory back and with the advantage that the B&O had perfect recall. Penny was hamming it round the room half-naked like a part-peeled bar of chocolate, trying to persuade him not leave Helensborough because the ministry had it in for him and he would be impotent behind bars. Her glossy breasts clashed with rural decor of the room. At intervals in her Ophelia act, she jerked to a standstill, her hips twitching back, breasts coming forward hard. (Reminding him of the Soho palaces just before the curtains come down on mama's once-upon-a-time little girl, completely without her tinsel: open, but only to penetrating stares.) He was judging audience-reaction to an album made up of the tapes. Occasionally, Ophelia's face would constrict and appear to occupy less than its customary space, while her lips slid wetly back over her teeth. At these times, Mayer would make a small ankh-mark on the sheet-music above the appropriate bar. The mixing engineers could later smooth the performance off. Please don't go,' she said, '...unh.' He remembered that the stripper on that gig had been French Modesty. Blase, he had refused to take her with his boots on, preferring to avoid the implied link with Lady Hamilton. 'I have to go out for some cigarettes.'

there were perhaps five hundred of them

The crowd was composed of fans who had taken to following him about the country since the first hit single. They were clogging the street in silence. Earlier, they had overturned a Rentokil van as its driver tried to force a passage. He had disappeared shortly after the incident, under quiet bestial

feet, his face a contracting smear of pain. *Their* faces were drained, inclined to watch the window. Certain gestures granted individuality, although their eyes permitted none: a youth fiddled with his yellow lapels, a blonde pale girl thrust both thumbs into the waistband of her denims. Natesby's finger were hard and precise on his thighs and abdomen, but the crowd worried him, After her climax he said, 'Perhaps they lacked something, something in childhood, an apple given as a sign of affection, a pony, a blow...' 'Give me the thing if you aren't going to try again, you know you always make a mess with it.' There were about five hundred of them. 'They killed the Rentokil man because he broke the silence.' She took the condom to the sink.

how they entrain themselves

The minister was worried. 'We believe he is a sheet-metal worker named Howard,' he said. 'In 1969, Howard simply vanished. Until then, he had lived in Notting Hill with a woman called Ophelia who had penicillin connections. She was a Negress. She was a physiotherapist at Saint Luke's. Six months before his disappearance he grew a thick black beard and took to wearing a waisted reefer jacket with anchor buttons. Like many of his generation he smoked the occasional joint while refusing to condone his elders' use of the Michael Miles anodyne. He played an all-night gig in a Greek Street blues club then walked into the dawn rain, carrying only his guitar. It was a hand-made John Bailey.' 'You mention this because it may have significance?' The minister's P.A. nodded, running a thin tapered hand through his tight-curved hair. 'The last song of the Greek Street gig drew much applause. Certain of the beat-up foxes in the audience were said to have experienced spontaneous orgasms, coupled with the sensation of a dead fish wedged in the thoracic area.' 'This may have been a trick of the

light.' The minister ran a slim tapered hand through his P.A.'s curly brown hair.

the nervous breakdown

Lately, Mayer had become conscious of several swelling focal-points: little bladders and pustules located in the head, stomach, and jaws: all straining and setting up pressure. Only one at a time would become ripe. He felt that at any time there might be a white, noisy fulmination somewhere in his lower jaw. After that, there would be waves humming out in concentric circles, planar-cutting at synapses, slicing his cells. Up along the shore writhed the motionless flaking girders of a breaking-yard. Shimmering in the brassy light, one whole steel spine of a dead tanker dominated a bushveld of rusty spars. In front of the bandstand but behind the crowd, the cyclothymic sea; and behind the generator vans the city heaved up out of its dockland, erecting tower-cranes to cover the fact of its July impotence. Half the dockers were redundant. No steel, no ships, no orders for the yards. Mayer in a lace-fronted shirt was wound round his mind like the coils of an electro-magnet. After two hours of playing, his lips and throat were sore. The audience, insatiable, were slow-clapping for another climax. Gimp waltzed forward grinning apishly. Sweat was running down his arm and dripping off the polyester finish of the Gibson. He began to wave it around like a shaman's totem, which it was, pulverizing the afternoon under a welter of bent major chords. 'I'm COMING, see the SWEAT,' he screamed at the faces on the sand. They shrieked back, loving him. The drummer flayed out a final roll on his near-human skins. 'I'm going to burst, I'm going to BURST.' They all got ready to wind it up. On the last fuzzed seventh, the pustule in Mayer's head exploded.

meat on a slab

(In summer in Kentish Town there are open butcher-stalls, and arranged in the sun are shallow rectangular trays of chopped steak and kidney. They are supported on a canted wooden slab which projects into the pavement so that the meat can be examined by prospective customers – grey cardboard old women, and the Maidenform girls. Because of the slant, blood from the choppings forms a little grainy puddle at the edge of the trays. Flies settle on the meat. Sometimes they drown in the puddle. Howard's wings stopped on the beach at Helensborough. And the butchers pick them out.)

it's too much

‘We have reason to believe that he made his British comeback three months ago as vocalist for the All Electric Orgasm Band, and now be working out his mid-brain disorders through the personality of Mayer. Our agents believe this to be true.’ They walked to Hyde Park and watched five hundred fans smoking on the grass by the water. Some of them were feeding the wildfowl. Periodically, one group detached itself from the main body and thigh deep among the ducks sang a choral arrangement of something from the Pop 100. The minister whistled along with Soul Masturbation Instinctive Blues. It was the only part of the programme he knew. ‘It cannot be allowed to continue. We have the Ministry of Modesty at our heels, they are demanding some sort of action. These people follow him regardless.’ ‘Not to mention the Women’s Institute.’ ‘A half-thousand of them yesterday in Oxford Circus, crying.’

some kind of climax

The blown-up photograph of Guevara's dead body above the stove had curled and rucked in the steam. It hung away from the blistered wallpaper. The fans had only become silent since his breakdown. 'Before,' he mused, 'they shouted after me. Some fainted (or pretended to faint) in the hope that I would invite them into my dressing room.' Natesby looked up from the sink. 'I think it's stuck in the U-bend,' she said. 'They sent me presents. Once, I received a dozen decorated eggs.' Marina straightened up, brushing a wisp of etiolated hair from her forehead. 'I got it through the grid all right but now it's stuck. I should have flushed it down the bog.' 'Another time, five hundred cigarettes and an embroidered handkerchief as a Christmas present from someone I had never seen.' 'They should make them soluble or something.' 'The names of all the band were embroidered on it.' He had run out of cigarettes. He put on his coat. The hall was painted a shade of brown. Perhaps they'll shout this time, he thought. A sea of grey faces faces in the street, all inclined at the same angle, necks awkward, staring at the window. Which promised no orgasms. As he opened the door, a low moan issued from those nearest him, the single extended syllable of a moan. None of the faces changed. None of the them looked at him. They stared at the uncompromising window with eyes like dead fish. The long moan reached the periphery of the crowd and stopped. 'I'm here,' he said. They gazed at the frigid window in silence. 'I'm here.' He closed the door and ran back up the stairs. Natesby was pulling herself from the floor where he had left here, steadying herself with the corner of the sink. There was blood running from the corner of her left eye. 'You shouldn't have done that.'

SIX

Visions of Monad

ONE: IDENTITY

Bailey: supine on the studio floor – head pillowed on hands, phallic cigarette – watching the girl Monad apply paint to ten square feet of canvas with a palette knife. Monad: nineteen and self-possessed, painting with her whole organism, in swift, precise movements; Monad in pale blue, nubile.

It was late afternoon. The light in the studio was turning brown: puddles of late-September sun dappled his scruffy clothing. Bailey had done nothing all day but lie on the floor, smoking steadily, near to unconsciousness. Nor had he done anymore than eat or sprawl on the studio floor or make love in lax, inert fashion for a week. Lately he had taken to sleeping for thirteen hours out of the twenty-four.

By contrast, the girl had filled half her canvas. Her technique was good – positive and self-possessed as her body – but her objective was unclear. In all probability,

another week would elapse before anything coalesced from the slash of chaos on the canvas. Bailey was not interested in the process of creation. He would view the result with the eye of a professional, and she would bow to his judgment, accepting the validity of his critique without question. Because of this submission in the face of authoritative sources, she had little chance of becoming a true artist. Bailey knew this, but did not tell her. Until such time as the picture was complete, he would remain silent. S.D. had left him very little concern with such matters. Since leaving the Institute he had not touched a brush. He had abandoned his own studio in Holloway.

He saw himself as caught in a twilight period; an Orpheus of the concrete city, suspended between the Hades of Sensory Deprivation and full, sterile awareness of the outer world. His psyche hung in a limbo fashioned partly from the total awareness of itself to be found in the Tank – with its lack of tactile sensation, its constant subliminal noise level, and its amorphous lighting – and partly from the complete perception of things to be found in the loud life of the city. Consequently, he lacked drive.

He had left the Holloway flat for two reasons. Hollis, who headed the S.D. research team at the Institute in W.I, had been pestering him with daily tests – orientation, motor response and the like – and he had become angry with this nagging interruption of his thought processes. The second reason was less concrete and by far the more powerful of the two. He had felt an indefinable need for a liaison, and a need to forge a link between his wandering mind – floating, drifting in its amniotic fluid of ab-reality – and the city. Monad, who loved him, had become that link, an anchor-chain mooring him to the reality of her society, her painters, and poets and parties. He had moved in with her and refused even to return to Holloway to collect his mail.

His lassitude had ceased to worry him over-much. At first he had tried to defeat it, and had returned to his earlier love of

poetry when painting ceased to interest him. He had immersed himself in the works of Eliot and Thomas, and attempted to exorcize the blankness in his head by writing it down. He had finally given up. His last poem, an attempt to carry the work of the pre-nineteen-fourteen Imagists to its fullest extent, had read, simply:

gethsemane

He had begun to realize his problem, then. He had gone into the S.D. experiment to escape the broil of conflicting actions and concepts in which the city had threatened to suffocate him: he had come out of it with Nirvana – and a vision.

So he lay on the studio floor as the light turned brown, watching Monad's body. When it became too dark to paint, they ate and then made love. Monad was happy.

Morning. Monad in pale blue, shopping in a supermarket. Monad among the chattering, dull, women, a denim-hipster dryad.

Bailey: lying on the double bed, watching his hands tremble and not seeing them.

When the girl suggested a shopping expedition, Bailey roused himself from his torpor and agreed. He got as far as donning his battered cord jacket and walking with her to the front door. But the door opened on the street and the perspective of the street brought on his vision. The shift, the change of key was as immediate as a tropical dawn: the street – a perfectly ordinary brown-stone hangover from Victoriana – faded into *the* street, the long, sweeping vee of his hallucination. He shook his head wordlessly at her. She nodded sympathetically and flirted off alone, swinging the shopping bag to some young girl's rhythm in her head.

Bailey shut the door after her and leant on it for a minute before he made his way carefully up the stairs. He *had* to be careful; not only did the stairs get mixed up with the vision; becoming a sort of out-of-phase corollary of it; forcing him to consider whether he was placing his feet on them or some miasma in his head: but also, the return of the hallucination always stimulated certain motor defects that had originated from his stay in the Tank. After the experiment, he had been unable to walk a straight line; he now had difficulty in guiding his foot to the next step of the stair. Some curiously detached part of him laughed dryly: Hollis would probably blow a fuse if he could measure Bailey's hand-tremor rate at this moment. There was no doubt that sustained sensory deprivation had a far more lasting physical effect than Hollis suspected.

He sank on to the bed and relaxed his grip, allowing the hallucination to swamp him. Exterior noise – the rumble of heavy wagons on the main North Circular drag, shouts of children in a school yard – cut out completely. First, the titles of the books on the shelf: Robert Gittings on Keats became a dark blur, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* a red one, the shelf slowly sidled out of existence. The nude portrait of Monad above it was followed. The last thing to go, sucked into greyness, was Monad's joke. Written in four-inch block-capitals on a sheet of white card, it was placed on the north wall, facing him. The legend exclaimed irreverently:

IT'S ALL STOPPED HAPPENING

Monad's appreciation of sexual innuendo was overt.

Then there was nothing but the hallucination, etched in grey-green on grey.

Bailey was standing in the middle of a road. His feet were placed on either side of the unbroken white line which extended in front of him without a curve. The horizon, too, was a perfectly straight line, clearly visible and unfogged by

distance; a horizon a child might have drawn, dividing its picture into two equal, symmetrical rectangles. It existed merely as a dividing line: a separation of empty, light-grey sky and sick-green earth.

This sharp definition was repeated where the sides of the road met its surroundings. There was no sign of a kerb, nor was there gutter or peripheral vegetation: solely a precise, geometrical line.

Visually, that was all – a flat, three-tone landscape, unrelieved by vegetation or building; the white line running unbroken up the centre of the road to its vanishing point.

However, the Perspective – Bailey's mental shorthand describing the whole sensation – was not completely visual. There were auditory and tactile manifestations as well. As soon as the noises of the city faded, and usually before the visual component of the dream was anything like completed, Bailey would become aware of the wind at his back. It was cold and hard, and it sang: a single, clear, unadulterated note.

The dream became reality. Slowly and stiffly, Bailey, impelled by something nameless within himself, unable to contradict its orders, began to walk towards the vanishing point of the road. The wind pushed him steadily along, a cold hand in the small of his back. The objective side of his mind stopped commenting on the scene from its vantage-point of consciousness and turned subjective. Utterly caught up, he walked without thinking anything...

He had been walking for an hour when Monad reasserted the other reality, the existence-pattern of the 'normal' world. She shook him gently and he stopped stumping fixedly to the unmentionable vanishing point. The wind died. There was a moment of disorientation in which he struggled to be part of one continuum or the other, flailing with his limbs to establish his whereabouts in space and time. Then, as he succeeded in focusing the microscope of his mind, the bedroom swam into sudden clarity. He looked with interest

at its walls, as if they were new to him, noticing the details he had not seen before. There were faults in the study of Monad. He tried to remember who had painted it.

The girl took his trembling hands to her breast, warming them. They were not trembling through cold, but the maternal gesture was gratifying. Suddenly, he remembered who he was and what he had been doing, and for some reason the knowledge made him cry like a baby.

Monad the hostess, in a studio full of people: talking animatedly of Bailey, as if she possessed him. Bailey: lounging with the inevitable cigarette, surrounded by beards and corduroy trousers – half-listening to young men discussing his poetry. Monad: out of denims for once: Monad the nymphette in a pale blue shift of silk, college-girl-madonna.

Earlier that day – the second after Bailey's latest walk along the perspective – the girl had scribbled: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, HIROSHIMA on the studio wall and invited a gaggle of intellectuals to a party. There were about thirty people crammed into the room, mostly earnest young men from art colleges. A good proportion had gravitated towards Bailey to compliment him loudly on his recently published *Recollections of a Piebald Unicorn*. He found their vital, enthusiastic attention pleasing, but was embarrassed to discover that he could not recall half the poems in the slim volume. They were all relics of his pre-S.D. days; hard to reach. His experiences in the Tank had blocked off a great deal of his memory. Another thing, he reflected, that Hollis had neglected to investigate.

Paradoxically, the large amount of whisky he had drunk, had, far from numbing his brain, brought him one of the moments of insight he experienced with mounting infrequency. He began to ponder. *Exactly* why had he consented to take part in the sensory deprivation

experiment? Precisely what had driven him to see two weeks' isolation from the world and forced him into the negative stimulus of the Tank? The young men were eclipsed much as the bedroom had been two days earlier. He concentrated. The answer came readily, but it was not simple.

There had been...to much.
He had been...sick; ill with the complexity of life; a malady with the city as its symbol. Pleased by this vague success, he began to probe for a tangible, a more solid memory upon which to found the architecture of his rejection of the things that surrounded him. He delved, and came up with the diary. At first, he could picture only its cover and spiral binding. He took another drink and deliberately let the image of the book blot out his environment. Then having satisfied himself that the memory would not dissolve, he reached out delicately and opened it.

January 7th:...finding it more and more difficult to sleep; my brain rushing round in neurotic circles; thoughts like a speeded-up tape recording, gibberish until I (I? No, Until Gardner's depressants...) slow them down. The city has revealed itself as the nigger in this stockpile; although whether it is actually the root of malaise, or just a convenient scapegoat upon which I project my inner turbulence, I cannot tell...

January 13th: At its simplest level, the city is a maze in four dimensions, a purely physical ant-heap; over-large, over-complex, and over-populated. I am continually frightened that the size and complexity of the hive will one day cause it to implode, to fall in on itself in a million slivers of coloured glass and lumps of rotting concrete. Yet, this fear aside, I catch myself wishing it would do just that: anything to escape this incredible multiplicity of directions and vectors. I hardly dare leave the studio; outside it becomes impossible

to choose from a thousand ways to go; I lose my identity immediately and travel blindly, in a frantic nightmare of Underground maps and back streets. This morning I set out for Reynolds the Publishers in East 4, with the 'Unicorn' manuscript. I came to in Kingsbury, shivering feverishly and wondering why I had gone there.

January 15th: The cause-effect relationship is distorted surrealistically among all these lives and thought-patterns. Nudge a man in Greek Street, Soho, and he falls off a pavement in Plumstead; drop a stone in the Serpentine and a ship goes down in an Adriatic storm; bombard your target nucleus with neutrons and happy anniversary Nagasaki. Every action presents myriad side-effects, which are unpredictable. I cannot make a decision for fear of its unnoticed, incalculable results.

February 1st: This *must* stop. Gardner the head-doctor tells me to leave the city before I break down. (Before? He has yet to see me at night, wincing and twitching at every sound...) Today he brought with him a man called Hollis who thinks he can help me. I must be taking up too much of Gardner's time for him to fob me off with some pinch-penny researcher who can't afford to buy a subject for his experiment.

Hollis outlined his ideas as neatly and precisely as he is groomed and tailored. Unlike Gardner, who acknowledges art, he is the brusque, clipped epitome of science; the all-British owl-eye of indigestion advertisements. I asked him why he hadn't gone to spiritual mecca of all researchers, across the the big water, and he started a long spiel on Britain's world-position before he realized I was gently sending him up. The temperature of the room dropped considerably.

However, to give credit where credit is due, his experiment is attractive: it offers a fixed course, or at least, a chance to search for one. There is a possibility that during the

experimental period I will be able to pin down a concept that does not have as many heads as a hydra. Hollis warned me that no one is quite sure of what effects sustained disconnection from reality will have on a person. I am afraid I earned another black mark by laughing at him...

Bailey allowed the the diary to fade out. The party took its place, noisily. Somebody refilled his glass. He considered his position, relating it to the events leading up to Hollis's appearance.

Obviously, he had found his 'concept' in the Tank. Its representation, its ideograph, was the Perspective. Unfortunately, it seemed to have become as much of a fixation as had the complexity of the city before it. He was strangely unmoved by the knowledge that he had exchanged one neurosis for another, a frenetic maelstrom for a degenerate stasis. He ignored it in favour of a question that had flashed, vivid and unbidden, into his brain-
What would happen if he reached the vanishing point?
The prospect was fascinating.

TWO: NATIVITY

Extracts from the private journal of Dr. James Hollis, Head of Dept. 4, the Guirand Institute, London, England:

February the fifth: B. arrived at the institute this morning disguising his almost pitiful gratitude for this opportunity under a thin cloak of artistic smugness. He was examined during the day and found to be in only mediocre physical shape.

He is, as Gardner noted, extremely disturbed and on the verge of nervous collapse. I begin to have second thoughts about using him, but there are no other volunteers.

February the sixth: B. reacted to S.D. in the expected fashion. A short time after we had settled in what he facetiously calls 'the Tank'; checked his respirator and nutrient drip; and begun to pipe the subliminal 'white-sounds' through his ear plugs, he fell asleep: a reaction confirmed as normal by Vernon at Princeton, during his 'Black Room' experiments in '54.

February the seventh: B. has been asleep for twenty hours: no doubt as a result of his previous mental exhaustion. 'The Tank' is behaving perfectly.

February the fourteenth: B. has now been deprived of sensory contact with the world outside his immersion chamber for nine days. He sees only a diffuse grey blur of light, hears only a constant homogeneous sound. He is aware only of the contact of the water in which he is suspended. The nutrient drip, respirator and pumping mechanism continue to function well.

9

p.m.: B. has begun to make leg movements. They are irregular and correspond roughly to the act of walking.

10

p.m.: Using the one-way telephone system, we attempted to contact B. and warn him that his movements were disturbing the drip-feed connection in his arm. There was a pause – during which the leg movements subsided – before he acknowledged us, using the previously agreed code; one long blink to indicate he had heard.

We then attempted to ascertain the reason for his movements, asking if he had become uncomfortable in any physical way; and if, as a result of this discomfort, he wished the S.D. period to be terminated. His reply was negative. My assistant then asked if he had experienced an hallucination, and attained an empathic affirmative signal, accompanied by a vigorous nod of the head which threatened to dislodge the electrodes taped to his skull.

We assumed that B. had experienced what Vernon notes as a 'Type Three' hallucination, in which the subject perceives definite objects, as opposed to the more common

manifestation of vague spots and blurs at the periphery of vision. We were unable to discover the reason for the leg movements which accompanied the hallucination. Mys assistant advanced the tentative theory that B. had actually *participated* in an hallucinatory activity.

February the eighteenth: B. requested that the experiment be terminated. Two or three weeks will pass before he is fully recovered physically. He is vague when questioned on the object of his hallucination, which has occurred on an average of twice a day since he first experienced it. He shows no signs of the mental disorder which exhibited before the experiment: in fact he is unnaturally calm and self-possessed.

March the tenth: B. has disappeared from his studio, Of late, he has been difficult to deal with, remote. I suspect that he regards my presence as an invasion of the private world he has constructed about himself. I am sure that this world has its roots in 'the Tank'. He is unaware of the danger of complete withdrawal in which he has placed himself. As ever, he sees himself as the Eternal Artist, oppressed by the bugbear of science.

Monad: painting again, her denim legs hypnotic. The canvas is nearly complete; her end product is already an accomplished fact.

Bailey: idly following an out-of-focus blue sprite as it dances with a complicated palette. Bailey: living the motorcycle vision of Gossing, who travelled his own perspective too far and too fast.

Bailey had been preoccupied with the problem of the vanishing point for some days before he remembered Gossing.

The first possibility to strike him had been that of his never reaching it, that the hallucination would develop no further. He had defeated that argument somewhat smugly - by

refusing to believe his mind uncreative enough to condemn itself indefinitely to vain pursuit: there must be *something* at the end of the road. He began a search for an alternative, coming up with theories ranging from the eventual confrontation of himself by himself, to the achievements of Nirvana. It was during this search that a youthful recollection of Gossing provided him with a prefabricated answer. Gossing's way of death had become a fixation of proportions matching those of the vision.

Gossing had died on the road.

He had been engaged in Ph.D. research in applied physics at a northern university: an isolated, withdrawn character who rarely spoke, and segregated himself stringently from campus society. He had evinced no open interest in women – to be fair, he had displayed none where men were concerned, either – and had regarded the antics of the student body with a sour contempt. Experiments with lysergic acid had been the vogue at the time, and these he had reviled with bitter humour, considering them a foolish blunting of the mind as a tool: referring to them scornfully as 'Happy attempts at intellectual suicide'.

In his last term he had built himself a motorcycle; a low, squat thing that resembled an insect -its dropped handlebars replacing the anhedral wings of a wasp at rest. The machine had been extremely powerful: Bailey could recall only vague detail, but remembered fear and dislike of the thing. He had been interested in it only as a symbol of Gossing's state of mind.

Bailey had concluded that Gossing's lack of sexual life left him with a need to assert somehow his essential maleness: the brute, thrusting power of the motorcycle had confirmed his masculinity. It had also furnished the sense of purpose his leisure time lacked because of his refusal to participate in the university's social life -which, however inane, proved an imperative direction.

Gossing had ridden the machine with an aggressive flair; laying it closely and almost viciously into corners – often with the footrests and silencers throwing up sheets of sparks as they grounded on the road surface – as if the road belonged to him alone. But he had not been reckless; every move had been calculated in his dry computer of a brain before being put into operation. There had been a harsh beauty, even poetry, in the way he handled it; in the way that neither man nor machine had submitted itself to the other, but had remained inseparable parts of a single organism – a high-octane centaur of the clearway.

Towards the end, however, he had become an extension of the thing. It had gained ascendancy, almost a personality of its own; and he road had exerted a malign fascination. He had been a pathetic, possessed creature at the time preceding his death; steadily more introverted, driven by the lash of what could only be represented by the hard, unreeling ribbon of the road and the howl of the slipstream; a man doomed and hurtling towards an unavoidable, gory climacteric.

Bailey's identification with Gossing was strengthened by the vanishing-point, their common crux. Monad's exotic dance with the palette knife and canvas retreated. Bailey had ridden once – once had been enough to kill the desire – on the pillion behind Gossing, and it was on that one experience that he now based his re-enaction of Gossing's final ride down the Perspective. He gave the word a capital letter impulsively; accepting the identification with Gossing; uniting Gossing's reality with his own vision. The muted hum of traffic outside gave way to a bellow of power. There was a seven-gallon fuel tank between Bailey's knees and fifty brake horse-power surged responsive under his throttle hand. Without a noticeable shift of reality, Bailey *was* Gossing.

'It's like this: out there, everything's simpler. On the road it all boils down to this: at that speed, you're either going to

make it – or you aren't...

Gossing-Bailey straightened the bike up, powering it firmly out of the last leg of the bend, Ahead, the road ran straight as a die, then broke into a series of elbows: the vanishing point. This was the ultimate high: here, for a few cathartic seconds, was the orgasm of the gods. He settled his goggles and flattened himself on the fuel tank, his chin on the foam pad. Deliberately, almost reverently, he wound back the twist-grip.

'...for a minute, you're on your own, and free: the fear doesn't come until you have to slow the thing down.'

Freedom: the road was a great elongated vee, empty but for the single particle of fierce energy that was Gossing-Bailey and the motorcycle. After two miles, the speedometer and the Perspective came together as one image, a circle superimposed on an open compass; the image of fulfilment. Then he had to start closing down.

'You don't want to come off the high. It's hell closing that throttle; it's admitting that neither yourself nor the experience is immortal..'

Orgasm is a transient thing. The machine wasn't slowing. In the space of a microsecond there happened an eternity of fear. He managed to nurse it through the first bend at a hundred and ten, taking a resigned pleasure in the achievement. But it was impossible at that speed to pull out and align the machine for the next one. His body jerked in a last ejaculation of panic. There was an improbable silence.

Bailey came back to the studio. Nobody had been sure whether Gossing or the motorcycle had failed on that ultimate straight. He knew now.

Bailey: supine on the studio floor - head pillowed on hands to stop them shaking – watching Monad paint. The choreography of creation is almost complete.

Bailey had not moved for two days. Inertia had finally taken him: he had found a balance between himself and the city. Only his mind moved, and that with growing lethargy, walking slowly along the Perspective.

Gossing's ghost was laid – or rather, it had taken its place in the schema of Bailey's illusion. Gossing and the circle of the speedo they had fished out of a ditch, still intact, needle wedged by the failure of its mechanism at one hundred and ten miles an hour; Hollis – Empirical Man and his Experiment; Gardner – the city anxiously looking after its own victim: all were integrated, assimilated; subordinate to the vision, and yet the bricks of which it was built. Bailey-Gossing/Hollis-Gardner were a composite entity, running down to the point of absolute rest.

He had ceased to eat and could not remember when he had last relieved himself. The only motion for some time, other than his plodding feet on the Perspective, had been Monad's dance, her choreographic coupling with the easel and canvas: and he sensed that this too was terminating. She was a blue shadow behind a window, the stained-glass of illusion.

Somehow, hers would be the final act. Monad's was the hand privileged to throw the last switch. He was content to wait. To all intents and purposes, he was still in the womb of the Tank, waiting to be born for the third time...

Monad made a last movement, decisively. Bailey, sensing the finality of the motion, tensed; the Perspective faded, but the girl was remote: her actions came across a great gap of space and time, a gulf, a hole in his awareness.

She danced over to him, smiling. He saw her once more as Monad in pale blue, then her identity slipped into the gulf. He felt her kiss his forehead, saw her step back and parody a curtsy, sweepingly. She motioned at the the canvas.

For perhaps five minutes, he searched the picture; taking in its greens and grays; noting the sharp, geometrical

definition of the skyline, the great tonal vee of the road, the unmentionable vanishing point. This, then, was it.

He conjured back the Perspective and compared the two overlapping images in his field of vision. Then he manipulated them gently, and they came together, matching perfectly, the world on the canvas and the weariness of his mind.

Tired, doggedly, he began to walk.

‘Do you like it?’ said Monad, anxious.

But Bailey could hear only the monochrome wind.

SEVEN

Events Witnessed from a City

In the company of rats, Dissolution Kahn and Choplogic the dwarf sat beneath the dome of the derelict observatory up at Alves, discussing the manifold peculiarities of Time and the uncertain nature of future events.

‘Further’, whispered the dwarf, revealing briefly his decaying teeth as if they offered some curious metaphysical clue, ‘I would mistrust people who do things; I would laugh circumspectly at their reasons for doing them.’

The city spread itself below them in the wet, equivocal afternoon light like interrupted excavations in a sunken garden. They regarded with some amusement the ghastly watchfulness of the footmen on the outer walls. The dwarf left his position at the embrasure and began to strut about.

‘If the human race continues to breed, it will continue: an act of extreme bad taste. What a splendid gesture, to free ourselves from our own biology, The refusal to give birth is a beautiful beginning.’

He stalked through the gloom of the observatory, his hand on his weapon.

'It is a Miltonic statement of intent, I agree.' Dissolution Kahn toyed with a delicate clockwork orrery, watching its tiny jewelled planets through an entire rotation. He gestured at the peeling star-charts decorating the walls. 'It must surely provoke some reaction.' He took out his pewter snuffbox. 'It can hardly be ignored, in fact.' He sneezed.

'That possibility must be allowed for,' chuckled the dwarf. Quick as a lizard, he drew his little sword and flung himself across the room. He impaled a rat, and then another. They struggled; how they squealed.

Choplogic sniggered, his friend joined in; their raucous laughter fled from the embrasures and out over the city.

After four millennia motionless on its axis, Earth had begun to turn again.

From a partially organic tower three miles inside the dark hemisphere, tegus-Cromis the poet watched the crawl towards him, a few laborious inches in twenty-four hours; a strange new movement reflected in events; a shift in the patterns. His instruments detected novel forms and seasons; new miscegenations.

Inbred Cromis (son of his sister, dark and ectomorphic in the sad wash of light) watched his indicators creep across their meters, witnessing the slow birth-trauma of the sun as it squeezed up over the rim of the world. Three miles separated him from the crepuscular zone; three miles, and a century. Often, he would smile, thin lips limned with blue phosphorescences as he pondered the hundred-year dawn.

He had a visitor.

She came out of out the cryptic forms of the twilight sector. The organic tower hummed. She glittered like an armoured fish, her pink roan hair blown back by strong winds. His thin long hands skittered like rats across the instrument panel. Her face leapt towards him, her lips were bloodless. The rats

scuttled and she receded. A silver leash trailed from her left hand.

Behind her stepped a crane-fly half as tall the tower of tegus-Cromis, its slow stilted legs and slim trembling abdomen chased with coloured arabesques and sphenograms. Eyes like clusters of ruby lasers, wild and mindless. It moved hesitantly. Huge bats orbited its pointed mask like shredded black cloaks, their sonar emissions interfering with cerise displays in the instrument room, their indistinct telepathies flickering to him in banks of coloured light.

‘Why should I let you in?’ he asked when she had reached the base of the tower. His voice hooted through the darkness, distorted by amplifiers.

‘Come to Alves.’ she answered. ‘Come to the city,’ it said. The woman began to fade, losing substance until his screens registered nothing. His fingers sought to follow her, throwing switches, increasing the gain of the sensors. But she vanished.

The skeletal after-image of the leashed insect remained for some time, fluorescing.

Out along the city wall, proctors kept the view.

Beyond the twilight sector, from the vast millennial darkness of the west, the towers of the poets moaned and hooted, exchanging data across a continent. Their huge voices modulated with the wind – at times immensely distant, at others close to hand. New shapes moved cautiously in the tortured twilight, gasping for breath.

Their dark cloaks flapping uneasily, the watchers toured their battlements. They murmured in low voices. They hooded their faces when the guard was changed and hurried away on urgent errands. They were beset by a sense of imminence:

‘The darkness is moving to fresh rhythms-’

‘Confirmation expected almost immediately-’

'-Fear death from the air-'

'Anticipate a visit-'

Bats overflow the city, to haunt its higher tenements. None were sighted in or around the observatory at Alves.

'Things are: things happen: do nothing,' whispered the proctors.

'It may be a little late for that.'

Indecisive Cromis assumed his tower had dreamt it all. He tapped his fingers gently against its flesh. He rendered it unconscious and sat silently in the gloom. Its tissues remained healthy and sane. It was not senile. He had tended it for seven centuries.

He took up a small, ornate syringe, property of an ancestor of his before the world had ceased to turn, wrapped a cloak of deceptive colour about his thin body, and made his way down arteries of pale, unsteady light to the entrance of the brain chamber, a smooth grey tumour in the meat of a corridor wall.

He shook his head. He swabbed his inner elbow with a local anaesthetic and took a small amount of veinous blood. This he injected into the tumour. After a moment, the ancient defences identified him, and the lips of a sphincter formed. He pushed them apart and entered.

The brain moaned drowsily at him.

'You had a dream.'

The brain reminded him that it did not dream.

He refilled his baroque spike, stabbed.

'Relate me your dream.'

The brain reminded him that it could not dream.

He stroked its smoother parts.

'Relate the dream.'

Nothing was solved.

'It is the sin of superbia,' said Choplogic the dwarf, spitting his rats lengthwise so as to cook them to a nicety. 'It is the

sin of desiring an existence separate from one's own dreary instincts – a simultaneous crime against Darwin and God.'

He made a small fire of the remaining astrological maps and implements.

'The final celibacy of decadence, the refusal to breed,' he murmured. 'Oh, it is the attainment of the last freedom.'

'More food, too.' Dissolution Kahn rubbed his bread. 'Look here, I seem to have broken this.' And, indeed, the golden orrery no longer performed its mechanical cycles. He took out his knife and investigated the clockwork with its point. At a loss, he prised the rubies from the outer planets and threw them on the floor.

'It worked beautifully before.'

Later, grease dripping down his chin, Choplogic returned to the western embrasure. Out there in the dark zone, the organic towers trumpeted across the wastes, measurements and warnings. He could make out no words, so he returned to his study of the city.

'What a sense of liberty is gained by the performance of one symbolic act on the grand scale,' he mused. 'Subtle, but a lasting joy to the trained observer.' He spat out some bones.

The Kahn, polishing the brass spikes on his black leather gloves, laughed. 'The proctors are steadily deserting their posts,' he said. 'Few remain. We would seem to have won a freedom from secular authority, as well as supernal. What a good thing.'

They slept. When they woke, they caught and ate more rats. The long afternoon wore on.

Down in Luthos Plaza and Replica Square, in the cellars of "The Blue Metal Discovery" and all about the base of the cobbled hill at Alves, the citizens held celebration of certain salient points in the overlong history of the planet – Bruton's destruction of the machine in Shaft 10: the global rationalization plan of Crispin Wendover and his Ministry of

Intent: the final braking of Earth's rotation by Rotgob Mungo in the so-called 'year of the little decision'.

Gerald Paucemanly addressed a gathering by electric megaphone, wearing his nicest silver lame. He drank half a pint of amyl nitrate. 'Strip the bark off a green tree today!' he cried. He fell over 'Cheerio!' 'Burn it off and lay concrete!' his friends applauded.

Lady Angina Seng, standing straddle-legged at the summit of her unlit pyre, sang her new song, 'I don't need anything here/I don't have any apparatus to carry except this one dislike.' She injected herself with fifty milligrams of Triptizone, directly into the left ventricle of her heart. Her lover wandered off.

All the withered fortune-tellers of Margery Fry Court and Waning Crescent went out slowly, like spotlights, swapping gossip from more delicate days: 'Headlights waltzing on the tennis courts!' 'Could this be a Limbo?' Nothing was saved but their tea-leaves and their tiny linen handkerchiefs smelling of parma violets.

'Choose your personal backdrop,' urged the undertaker's men: 'If they look to the east, they may not see your flames; to the west, your smoke may be invisible.'

Apostate proctors, committing the sin of despair, threaded the gaudy backstreets in search of a sensation or two.

Dr. Grishkin, the man with the window in his stomach, sawed off his own right arm.

Clowns burst from the arena.

Out in the waste, the tower of tegus-Cromis ran checking sequences, browsing the megacycles: receptors charted exchanges between blind animals, plumbed the burrows of lizards; the amplifier stacks hummed; the dark hemisphere of Earth murmured on the R.F. band.

Cromis bared his inner elbow, fixed himself on glucose while the indicators crept. He had lost his pleasure in the long

dawn. He thought of the illusory woman, and composed a new morality of assassination.

Later, he took the luminous arteries to the brain's chamber. 'Relate me a list of the Old Instincts.'

In search of relief, he ran a sterile tube from an incision in his wrist to a sphincter in the chamber wall. The brain room screens, possessed by blood-cell images of fish, hallucinated a jewelled coelacanth and a sea-horse plated with brass. He was losing his ascendancy.

Later still, the tower trembled beneath him.

He clutches his syringe. He was at a loss. He stumbled through the arteries of his home and discovered chambers and oubliettes he had never seen before. The tower shuddered. He dropped his cloak.

Finally, from the undersea gloaming of the instrument room, he called for help. The dark side sniggered at him ('Big lizard - little lizard - A hungry bat'), the amplifiers failed to respond. And when the inconceivable lurching began, he could not tell whether it was a function of the tower or of the Earth.

Instruments showed him an image of the world swaying, staggering. They showed him the twilight sector, growing closer.

Events witnessed on the city wall:

Two proctors remained there. The wind cut them as they stared into the west.

'The darkness is moving to fresh rhythms,' murmured Choplogic the dwarf.

Black smoke rose from the pyres in the city beneath. Whirled away by strong winds, it carried the bats before it like a migration of ragged cloaks.

Reluctantly, he abandoned his vantage point at the window.

He studied the interior of the observatory for a moment, showing his filthy teeth,

He placed the hilt of his little sword carefully against the ribcage of the dead Kahn. It shone in the dim brown light of the afternoon. He pushed himself on to its point, groaning quietly. The observatory walls faded momentarily. He held his stomach.

‘Admire the death-rate solution,’ he whispered, staring into the eyes of the corpse, as if they offered some cautious meta-physical clue.

Then he dragged himself back to the western embrasure to smile at the great grey fleshy towers of the dark side as, hooting and lowering across the cryptic landscape of the twilight sector, they advanced on the city.

EIGHT

London Melancholy

1

We made it to London Melancholy at grim twilight. The derelict landscape: what buildings remained there loomed in a massive grey silence from empty pools of shadow and cold mist. Thin Molder folded his wings, sniffed, and said: 'Because I am now the leader...' But he couldn't pull an order from his head, scratch it though he might and despite the wrinkled skin between his eyes, a sure sign that he was trying hard. So we laughed at him and he wasn't pleased. Only Malice didn't join in. He kept his face long and bleak.

Morag-Morag had missed an updraught the day before, and broken her neck on a bent radio mast at Hilmorten Hard-Edge. She was old, but a beautiful leader who thought deeply. We missed her immediately, hovering about her folded body shrouded in its pale broken wings. Her limbs had somehow become snared on the flaking metal spars two hundred feet from the ground. The wind handled her blond air, which was like gold wire against the rusty pylon; it

stirred her wings constantly, so they alternately caught and lost a reflection of the grey sky; she hung there, dead. All of a sudden, there was nobody to tell us what to do. We didn't know to do with her. Fay Glass, the mad girl, perched above her corpse, clinging to the mast and whispering: 'In my youth I made my small contribution. Venice becomes like Blackpool, leaving nothing for anyone. Rebellion is good and necessary.' Then she began to cry. We nodded to her; to a degree, sympathetic; but also wrapped in our own sadness. There was only one place for us after that.

'London-of-the-sorrows,' said Malice Priest.

'London Misery,' said Two Jane.

'London *Melancholy*,' insisted Thin Molder. 'And *I'm* the boss!'

So we named Hillmorton Hard-Edge and kicked away into the updraughts. Morag-M watched us away with blind eyes. The winds were blowing south. We met no dragonflies.

Two Jane had an instinct for domesticity. She found us a sixth-floor room well above the fog-layer. It had a bed (Thin Molder claimed it immediately, bounced on it, looked pleased) and several blankets, none of them very mouldy. A fungus-stain crept across the north wall, shaped like a baby. It was cold, and there was a red carpet. It had been used before, but a long time since: someone had scrawled KILROY /S HERE on the yellowed wallpaper, in pencil. The graphite was smudged and faded. A pile of empty tins in one corner, discarded bottles elsewhere, a ewer green inside with long-dead algae: Kilroy had been gone a year or more. We sat on the floor, waiting for Thin to direct us. Fay glass stared out of the windows at the mist-layer, which was faintly silver in the fading light. She sang; the same wordless line over and again.

'A foraging party,' suggested Malice Priest.

'Shut up,' said Molder. 'I send the foraging parties out, not you.'

‘I’ll go,’ I offered, to keep the peace. I like new places. There is something about a new building, somewhere you haven’t been before. Something electric in the air. It never lasts, though.

‘Take Fay with you, she’s getting on my nerves,’ said Thin.

Fay, who is otherwise quite ugly, has amazing blond eyes that are mostly vacant. But just then she came to the surface of them and smiled at me. They glowed. She comes out of her head, sometimes, to live in the real world for a while; not often. Nobody knows what locked her up like that in the bones of her own skull. ‘My party promises you a stable economy,’ she said: ‘Pacifism isn’t going to win this war.’ She seemed to expect an answer, although you can never tell. I took her arm and said, ‘You could be right, Fay.’

She could have been right, at that.

‘Get a move on,’ said Thin. He never had any patience with Fay. Unlike me, he was never black-magicked by her yellow eyes. His loss, that’s all.

Outside the room ran a dim corridor with a ceiling-high mural of grey, fluffy mould on one wall – a mad, formless tapestry of shifting tones and vaguely suggestive shapes. It fascinated the mad girl. She stood in front of it, a small, introspective smile on her lips. (That smile, she reserved for the mist at dawn; the dry, gaudy husks of dead dragonflies; and once in a while for the cryptic tendernesses of her love-making.) She wanted to touch it and I had to pull her away. She murmured fractiously and thereafter kept stumbling because her eyes weren’t on the business in hand.

She almost fell down the stairwell.

Wide parquet steps wound into the gloom of the mist, which filled the third floor, presenting a deceptively smooth face. Stray wisps of the stuff writhed up, stung our eyes and clawed at the membranes of our throats. We stared down for a moment, then made for the ground floor.

In dragonfly land, the mist was tinted oily yellow. Faintly luminescent, it heaved continually, a slow and ugly motion,

like a heavy sea. We too moved slowly. Fay's eyes distended warily behind the perspex panes of her respirator; her body tensed beneath the tough, iridescent folds of a gas-cape made from dragonfly-wing. Behind us, she ran out a thin nylon umbilical cord from a spool that squeaked deafeningly in the undersea gloaming. I discovered my hands occupied more and more often with the grenades at my belt, finding a measure of cold reassurance in their hard fragmented surfaces. The blank face of the mist warped vision, destroying perspective and orientation. We collided frequently with walls and shadowy, decaying fixtures that seemed to loom up out of our own heads. And this in a deepwater haunted silence that made us prey to internal spectres, personal images of ground-floor fear.

But there were no dragonflies.

Kilroy or one of his predecessors had stripped the kitchen efficiently. Shelves like toothless gums grinned through vortices of mist. Thick nodules of mould on working-surfaces where perishables had been left. Rusty implements and peeling chrome fascias. Fungoid growths made intricate spiral patterns, constructions as delicately posed as sanity in the shifting phosphorescence. We searched in silence. Finally, Fay whispered: 'Best quality produce. This committee will ensure a steady rise in the general standard of living. Preservatives have been added.' She had found two seven-pound cans of ham and a large square tin without a label. Kilroy's cache, stowed behind a disembowelled microwave cooker.

I gave her the high-sign, and we left, following the umbilicus. There is something infinitely pleasant about knowing that the ground floor is behind you. The ascent from Hades, and no one has ever been known to look back.

In the room on the sixth, Thin Molder and Malice Priest were fighting it out. The racket was audible halfway down the corridor.

Two Jane was huddled up on the bed. Her clothes were undone and there was a bruise over her left eye. Molder and Priest were rolling about the floor, biting and elbowing each other inexpertly, and making animal noises. Priest got on top and gazed blankly at me, panting and sweating, his fingers anchored in Molder's throat. Blood ran into his eyes. There was a lull. Molder said something incoherent. There was a flurry of motion during which, more by accident than design, Priest caught a knee in the groin. He bellowed, staggered back, and grabbed at his laser. I should have stepped in at that point but Fay Glass was clutching my arm. Thin Molder screamed. I had to hit the mad girl to make her let go. I barked my shin on the end of the bed, dropped my tin of ham, and found that Priest had backed into a corner. Thin Molder was dead.

Priest was looking down at him with a mixture of surprise and triumph plucking at the muscles of his face. Slowly, his hand brought the laser to bear on me: of its own volition, it seemed, because *he* was still gazing at the corpse.

As if Morag-M's death wasn't enough.

'You can put it away now,' I said. I was frightened. The two women had begun to chatter. The sound was hard and enamelled, like the rattle of sparrows in a derelict warehouse. By the sound of it, neither could understand the other. Priest noticed me. He looked at me as if it were our first meeting, the flesh round his eyes crinkling up. He swallowed. A shudder passed through him. Then he said: 'Shut up. I'll cut you up-'

I had no standpoint from which to argue. You can't throw Mills bombs around in a twelve-by-twelve room.

Fading rose light picked out one side of Priest's face. His lower jaw had developed a disconcerting lateral twitch. I wondered who the dim light would hamper most if I tried to jump him. He seemed to divine my thoughts, took a firmer grip on himself. He made a small petulant gesture with the weapon. The room slid dizzily into total darkness.

For a lunatic moment, I thought Malice Priest had turned the sky off.

I bit my lips in blind confusion. Small noises about me, shiftings, creakings, and the whimpering of the women. Heat crawled in my palms. Then the window burst like a starshell, spraying glass in brittle, glittering arcs. Fragments spat and exploded against the walls.

Simultaneously, the light returned.

Framed by the pale rectangle of the casement, a monstrous triangular head thrust into the room. The last orange-drab of sunset lent it a partial aura. Beneath this dull halo, eye-clusters the size of melons glowed surly olive-green. A wedge-shaped snout, complicated by breathing apparatus. Viscid ochre liquid escaping the ebony carapace under the eyes. Outside, entomic limbs scraped at the sill for purchase. Overlaying the vision – buffering purely physical sensation – came the blunt, insistent head-pressure of meaningless insectile telepathies.

A dragonfly had come visiting.

Malice Priest had turned automatically to face it, but he wasn't doing anything: the laser drooped from his lax fingers, menacing nothing but the floor. He stood very still. His face was out of control. Breaking up with fear. A two-inch splinter of glass hung out of his twitching cheek. Two feet away, the inscrutable head clicked and twittered and dwarfed him. Some sort of impasse seemed to have been reached: Priest was paralysed; but the dragonfly couldn't get any further in. It redoubled its scraping at the sill. Wood-dust and splinters flew up.

I backed off to the bed, where Fay Glass was having a fit, her back arched improbably, her eyes protuberant and wild. A dark undertow of dragonfly consciousness tugged in my skull: slow, partly-formed images smoked through my mind. The shadows in the corners of the room ate up the light and moved steadily outwards. Two Jane beckoned from the door, her fingers fluttering idiotically. Her head was moving

rhythmically from side to side, as if her neck contained bent clockwork. Shadows interfered with my ability to make decisions. Fay kicked once and slumped, comatose. I shouldered the limp body and staggered out of the door. Two Jane, holding it open, seemed to have mastered the idiot mechanism of her neck. She now gazed rigidly ahead.

That corridor was beautiful. I had never seen a more beautiful thing; it was so calm and empty. Two Jane took the mad girl and made for the nearest window. I went back to get Priest.

The dragonfly had torn the casement frame out and pushed part of its thorax into the room. The splintered rectangle of wood hung crookedly from its armour. The dark viridescent eyes glowed within a foot of Priest's head. He was moaning, a low, animal ululation; there was blood all over his face, glinting dully. I saw quite clearly that nothing could make me go back into that place. A black forelimb squeezed itself through the window and plucked at the bloody figure. Its joints were leaking. Brickwork fell in on the red carpet. I slammed the door and vomited all over it.

We left through a window on the side of the building. Overloaded by the weight of Fay's inert body, I was forced to swoop low over the pale, bland face of the mist. Struggling for height, I watched it glow gently in the wan light of a crescent moon.

2

At the heart of London Melancholy lay an immense flatland of mist. It was smooth and torpid and faceless – it made no statements and it expected no answers. Its moods were reflective, like the moods of the moon. In the morning it stretched pink fingers to meet the dawn; pillars and faint suggestions of architecture arose; they failed to change its expression. At noon, the sun turned it incandescent as a

tungsten filament. It scarred the eye. And when the days burned to death, the mist bled in sympathy. At no time did the mask assume the character of the face beneath: the ground floor remained a hidden yellow broth, stirred sluggishly by enigmatic currents and haunted by dragonfly images.

There was a rough crucifix sketched on the plain, its impalpable arms radiating from a central building to four charred shells that stood out of the mist like root-fragments from a white gum. The stumps – one merely a wall, fingering up a hundred feet entirely unsupported – rose four-faceted in tiers of black window sockets, then terminated abruptly in thorn-tangles of bent and melted load-girders. At certain times of day, the sun would touch the glass of dead windows and let them live again, briefly and brightly.

Five blind buildings above the mist, dwarfed by the wreckage of a dragonfly ship a generation old.

The heart of London Melancholy was a scrapyard five miles square. Shattered hull-plates curved up between the buildings, black and pitted monoliths fifty yards high, their outer faces still bearing the weathered traces of great meaningless ideographs. Festoons of cable hung from yawning concave surfaces, lending them a disturbingly organic aspect. This was heightened by the drab areas of vegetation that had taken root in pockets of airborne loess. It all contrasted violently with the hundred-foot smears of corrosion that crawled down the exposed metal. The ribs of the ship had been scattered from its spine upon impact. They cast scimitar-shadows; inching across the plain, these indicated the buildings, like the calibrations of a sundial. The backbone itself lay north-south, in three segments, which bucked in half-mile loops – the scenic railway of an idiot's dream – across the fog-layer. The buildings appeared to sink, to drown, surrounded by the fins of enormous sharks.

We lived in the central building for a week.

Fay Glass had gold threads in her wings. High up, where the alar tissue emerges from the sheaths of muscle overlaying her shoulder-blades, the network is simple: three thick arterial branches, tawny, throbbing rhythmically as they draw blood from her system. But towards the blunt, broad wingtips the filigree becomes steadily more complex, its colour inclining from red-brown to pale yellow. Possibly it is some trick of the light – the blood is quite normally-coloured, quite human – but the fine transparency of wing is like crystal inlaid with gold. It is very beautiful. On the afternoon of the eighth day, I lay on the floor, watching her flash like a great jewel as she moved. Light burned up from the mist. I was pleasantly stupefied by the heat.

‘BLOW YOUR MIND, GABRIEL ROSSETTI,’ said Fay. She was reading the graffiti that covered the north wall. It was a huge sun-illuminated manuscript: scrawled injunctions in a variety of scripts and media: obscenities in pencil and burnt-stick, invitations in white chalk, a banner headline from a surrealist’s internal newspaper in bright red paint. Over two generations, the drab whitewash had become a vulgar palimpsest, each inscription overlaid by another.

‘IS THERE LIFE *BEFORE* DEATH?’ SAID Fay. There wasn’t very much to do. We had dragged in two beds from an adjoining room, giving the place a marginally permanent air. Two Jane was sewing something in a corner, a sheet or something. It was mildewed, dull grey and green. It had been an uneventful week, almost as if Morag-M were back with us.

‘THEE YOU GO,’ said Fay. She turned away and flung herself on one of the beds. Her lips petulant, she began to pick up handfuls of flock from the ancient mattress. Two Jane dropped whatever it was she was doing and told her not to be silly. Fay sulked. The heat was enervating, like a great weight on my chest. I dozed off and killed dragonflies in my sleep.

'I can hear something,' hissed Two Jane. She was shaking my shoulder, trying to penetrate a web of dream and an apocalyptic headache. 'Wake up for God's sake.' I managed to re-orient, struggling to dispel the last of the oneiric images. The light had turned brown: it was early evening; but the heat didn't seem to have abated. Dust motes toppled and swung in oblique bars of dull-copper sunlight. I put my ear to the floor, because it made a very efficient sounding board. The room below us had been used as storage space: it took up most of the fourth storey, and it was empty. I heard a faint scraping noise, an irregular rustle. Two Jane thrust her face close to mine, her mouth dragged down with anxiety at the corners.

'What are we going to do?'

'Go and see,' I said. I let my mind go blank and receptive, testing the emotional atmosphere for the taint of dragonfly. It was there; faintly, I felt that characteristic distortion of perception, saw the universe briefly bent through ninety degrees; but it was weak and diffused, like distant madness. I got to my feet and unhooked the remaining Mills bomb from my belt, wishing I had used the others less haphazardly.

The door of the store-room was scarred and covered with unintelligible chalk-marks. The noise had become much louder. It rose and fell in time with the waves of head-pressure that were beginning to affect us. Fay Glass was staring frantically about like a small distressed bird, her eyes unpleasantly alive. She started to bit her fingernails, yelping as one tore to the quick. 'Stop it!' hissed Two Jane, and slapped her hand. I kicked the door open and took a couple of steps into the room.

The dragonfly crouched on the far side of the room, across a dusty and sun-specked floor. In the warm, tawny light, it was heraldic: strange and beautiful, the dark green exoskeleton glowed richly, like oiled metal; the wings, quivering slightly, were shot with silver where Fay's are gold. Thorax and belly

were decorated with arabesque chasing and complex chrome-yellow symbols, like the ideographs on the shattered hull-sections outside. (It is difficult to tell whether these are merely natural markings or the artificial emblems of caste and identity – the armorial bearings of some dragonfly Chivalry.) Exaggerated eye-lobes caught the light like globes of rough obsidian. For an instant I found the thing more bizarre than threatening, as if the heat-dreams had not yet left my head.

It was sick.

Splayed and buckled, its limbs twitched, their joints excreting thick gouts of ochre fluid. There were laser burns on its carapace, a deep aimless cross-hatching, and its breathing-apparatus was missing. Chittering drowsily to itself, it ignored me. Faint telepathic projections: a formless irritation at the periphery of consciousness. Occasionally, it scrabbled weak forelimbs against the floor, creating pointless patterns in the dust. The burns weren't critical: prolonged exposure to the atmosphere was: its viscera were dissolving.

I began to back out of the room. The beast was as good as dead.

Fay Glass stepped in front of me.

She walked into the middle of the room, faltered, stopped. She gazed at the dragonfly, her eyes curiously lambent, her lips moving silently. The dragonfly became stone still, a sculpture in green and gold, impassive. Expecting another fit, I laid my hand on her upper arm. She ignored it: slim and still, stared at the dying insect. The obsidian globes glinted dully. It renewed the scraping of its forelimbs. Fay Glass moved forward, her head tilted to one side. I gripped her shoulder. She shook off my hand impatiently but impersonally: I had the strange sensation that I no longer existed for her.

The head-pressure increased.

They confronted each other for thirty seconds, mad girl and dragonfly: a thin mousy wraith with beautiful eyes planted in a sort of stiff homage before a heraldic sculpture. Her face was devoid of expression; but her eyes were luminous, energized.

‘We do not want to be here,’ she said. I got the silly impression that it wasn’t Fay speaking at all.

‘We did not ask to be sent here, we had no choice. We are dying but they keep sending ships. This place is unsuitable, but there is no way of telling them to stop. Our atmosphere installations are inefficient, we are drowning in your air. We are not breeding, the race is dying: shipload after shipload are dying sterile. It cannot go on.’

The dragonfly had become quiescent. Fay had backed up until the great eye-clusters were hidden by her body. She might have been touching the thing.

‘They told us this world was empty. We did not come expecting this. Stop fighting. Go away and wait. The ships will stop coming eventually. There are few enough of you left. Go away and wait: we are dying anyway-’

Her face lost its rigidity. She cocked her head again, a puzzled little moue tightening her lips. Her eyes flickered about uncertainly. Then she said:

We are dyingdyingdying, we. Are dying, we. Are: we dying. I? The government has announced that severe measures, rumoured to take the form of economic reprisal, are dying, help. The Soviet ambassador said: “We need. We-” ‘

She began to weep.

The dragonfly scrabbled, chittering and leaking. Wings thrashing impotently, it looked like a jewelled machine, out of control. Fay was convulsed. Her eyes psychotic, she ran aimlessly about, screaming ‘Help us!’ I grabbed at her, bundled her out of the door, fighting the sick enchantment of the insect metabolism. She stared into my face with inhuman anguish crumbling her features, yelled ‘Please!’ as if the Pit had opened in her head.

I pulled the pin and lobbed the bomb underhanded. It bounced, rolled innocuously across the sunny floor, vanished under the threshing insect. A last glance at the dislocated machinery of waving limbs, the abdomen curling until tail touched mandibles. Viridescent eyes burned at me. Then I slammed the door on the vision and flattened both of us against the wall. A dull gigantic cough. The building shook. A mammoth hand shoved the door off its hinges from inside, turned it to matchwood, which pattered against the opposing wall. Dust and smoke and splinters bellied out in a violent brown cloud. The mad girl *screamed*. She gabbled nonsense.

‘Shut *up*, damn you!’ I shouted. For a moment, I heard Thin Molder’s petulant, insensitive ghost in my voice. But I didn’t feel too bad about it.

Fay Glass had always talked rubbish.

3

Out among the scattered bones of the dragonfly ship two dark figures planed over the eye-searing quicksilver mirror of the mist, their tiny shadows racing before them across the rearing hull-surfaces. Catching a thermal, they gyred upward, doubling their height in seconds. Quick sparks of light as the sun caught spread wings. Heat struck up at me like a mailed fist as I watched from a window a hundred feet above. Behind me in the corridor, the dust and smoke were settling slowly. A fragment of dragonfly carapace like blued steel had stuck in the window frame. The building was quiet, and I could detect no dragonflies: the dead insect’s distress had gone unheeded. After a final check, I dropped into the white-hot turbulent air.

It was like flying into a wall. The airstream tore and battered at me, and it might have come from the mouth of a furnace. I found an updraught almost immediately. Locating Two Jane

and Fay, I climbed in rapid spirals and, having got well above them, dipped a wing. The resultant sideslip put me on a collision vector. I shot through Jane's slipstream and pulled a muscle in an attempt to match speeds. More enthusiasm than sense. 'Stupid,' she said, and I didn't know whether she meant me or Fay. The mad girl was goofing about, allowing her speed to drop to stalling-point then catching herself on the verge of a fall. Each time it happened she laughed delightedly. She seemed to have returned to normal.

We perched high up on one of the hull-plates.

A warm wind bumbled about us – creaking in a sheaf of rusty cables – as we stood on the ledge created by a stringer ten feet wide.

'What now?' asked Two Jane, her eyes never leaving Fay, who was talking to a sick little flower sprouting from a patch dust.

'We leave,' I said. Fay's idiotic speech had me uncomfortable. I wanted to be somewhere where I could forget it. Fay herself was reminder enough: she had abandoned the flower to its own devices and was sitting at the edge of the stringer, dangling her feet over an incredible drop, dabbling her fingers in a pool of rusty rainwater. A great black arc of steel yawning up behind her. That and the dropping moss of corroded cable. It was all a threat – hard metal, steel vegetation, and the long drop into the mist.

'Come away from there,' said Two Jane.

'It's quieter in the north,' I said. 'I don't know why we came here.'

Fay had returned to the flower. Preoccupied, I watched vaguely as her thin quick hands flickered about the pale yellow bloom. She was very gentle with it. They shared a wan beauty, her and the flower, and an identically precarious existence.

'We'll try the midlands again for a while. But I want to go north. Way up.'

Fay yelped abruptly and danced backwards. She was licking her hands, waving them about. There were tears on her cheeks.

The flower had become a charred little heap, black ashes already beginning to stir gently in the warm wind. A thin white line crept down the dark alien metal, smoking and fading through ochre to dull orange, then red. A curious smell, hot and bitter. Two Jane was huddled over the mad girl's burnt hands. Fay whimpered. Suddenly unable to move, I watched the laser beam cut a second groove across the hull-plate less than a foot from my head. It was lightning-jagged this time, as if the hand that held the gun was trembling.

Two Jane, staring over my shoulder with big eyes, yelled something incoherent, pointed.

I took a few steps forward; leapt; slammed into her left side. The impact jarred every bone in my body. She tottered, screamed, grabbed at the mad girl for support. Wailing, both of them fell off the edge of the stringer. The bodies diminished in size, tumbling over and over as they fell. I caught a flash of silver as spread wings clawed at the air. The long cry faded. Satisfied that they were safely out of the way, I turned to face Malice Priest.

He stood, swaying, fifteen yards away, feet planted wide apart, the laser clutched black and cumbersome in scarred grey fists. His clothes hung off him in flapping tatterdemalion strips. His left cheek was a purple and yellow smear of necrosis and puss, stiff and distended. (As if to compensate for this partial immobility, the rest of his face twitched constantly, charting strange, ephemeral continents of emotion.) Out of the ruin his one good eye burned bright and fixated. He stank. Raising the weapon to cover me, he began to move forward, his gait rolling and unsteady. When he had come within speaking distance, I said: 'It's me. You can stop shooting now. Jane will take care of you-'

The smashed face was hideous, the single eye a window on nothing I could interpret. His mouth had somehow got lost in a mass of puffy, suppurating tissue. The gangrened areas looked like fungus flesh: lurid, and deceptively firm. He didn't lower the gun, merely made an odd, torn little sound, conveying pain. The effort involved in squeezing it past those corpse's lips left both of us trembling.

'No,' I said. 'You're all right now. We'll look after you.'

He found a voice. The words emerged distorted, blurred at the edges by the corpse-hole in his face: 'Shot it, the dragonfly. You left me. I'm all on fire. I'll cut you up, you'll burn.'

I dropped flat, abandoning reason in favour of reflex, as his fingers tightened convulsively. The heat discharge scorched across my scalp. The ledge was warm and gritty to the touch: it terminated half an inch from my outflung hand.

Priest continued to gaze through the space where I had stood, blinking his sound eyelid slowly. The laser trembled.

'I'm the boss,' he said. 'I send the foraging parties out.'

He looked down at me.

I suppose I should have fought him for the laser: he was tired and ill; but I couldn't bear the thought of that shattered, reeking face pressed up close to mine. His fingers twitched again. I rolled off the ledge, my clothes smouldering where the beam had caught me. The pain was excruciating.

Almost pleasant, this long free fall: I drifted, exploring the pain. It centered in my side; the air bit at it with sharp needle-teeth. I flexed various muscles. The left alar surface was dragging, responding fractionally slower than the other on each stroke. Priest had come near to clipping my wings. There was plenty of time to check: cradled in euphoria, I floated, not caring very much. Nothing seemed to be badly damaged. I fell some more. Became aware of two figures falling with me. Underwater posturings. They gesticulated,

making mouth-noises that were immediately whipped away by the airstream. I laughed merrily. My speed had built up to the point where I had to pull out or plummet into the mist. Or strip a wing. Stupid, I thought. More enthusiasm than sense...

Shock-happy, I braked hard. The agony of setting the damaged wing against the kiln-wall of the air wrenched me sharply out of it. Two Jane and Fay Glass flanked me as I bulleted over the mist.

“Move it!” I yelled. ‘Get some height-!’

The black iota hunting out of the golden sky was Priest: a ragged falcon, and we the sparrows. Superheated air eddied around us as the laser beam fingered out. We hit a thermal turbulence boiling up from a dark tangle of wreckage; gyred up; began to lose speed. Priest shot past us twenty feet away, squawking like a black gull. I recalled the eastern seaboard, and the harsh, high-speed squabbling of sea-fowl above the corroded skeletons of off-shore oil-rigs. He banked, spun, and pulled up short, his wrecked body impressively controlled.

The updraught increased as we manoeuvred over the shark-fin of the hull-plate. Our climbing-spiral tightened with the corresponding acceleration. I took a hurried look back. Priest, having lost the advantage of height, was cruising about at mist-zero, firing the laser in five-second bursts. His aim had become erratic. As I watched, he began to climb doggedly after us.

A lull. We struggled for height, ignoring each other.

Fay Glass is rarely happy with concrete beneath her feet; but in the air – that is something else. The swift-shifting currents are her milieu, the bright wind-drift. She was laughing when the heat-beam hit her. Four thousand feet above the mist, she shouted in a peculiar guttural voice and fell like a bundle of brown rags, spinning. Her wings glittered uselessly. There was a glowing coal among the rags, then a bright bloom of flame.

I caught her.

She cartwheeled down, an incendiary puppet, and I *caught* her.

Mist and lunatic sky looped improbably, crashed and spun together. Bells in my head. The impact plucked me out of the updraught like a hand taking a fly; knocked me down, down, towards the bright rocking floor. Fighting her flailing limbs, disoriented, I rested the weight of both of us on my damaged wings. It hurt. We lost two hundred feet clear, accelerating and hopeless, before they bit, scooped, and hung like bleeding finger-ends from the parapet of the air. Slowing so slowly: half a mile slipping past and Fay (quiescent now, all her bright flames dead) mewling in my ear, indistinguishable from the complaint of the laminar-flow. I held steady at a thousand, clawing feverishly, wings singing like a distant dragonfly on a drowsy afternoon.

Which was no comfort at all because my beaten muscles weren't good for anymore climbing; and Priest was breathing down my neck. He hovered, his death-mask expressing nothing. The laser his sting. Two Jane could have been away and free, but she circled down and stared mutely at the mad girl's blackened clothing, at Priest's empty face. We hung in a desperate stasis. There was nowhere to go: If I dropped once more, it would be into the mist, and forever.

'I'm the boss,' said Priest.

He pointed the laser. The mad girl murmured painfully. Something meaningless.

'Leave us alone,' said Two Jane, 'why can't you?'

But Priest was imprisoned inside the bones of his own skull, and he didn't hear. His good eye blinked rapidly. He pressed the firing stud.

The world exploded. I fell about in a mad turbulence, clinging to Fay Glass as if her limp body might save us both. A dragonfly ship falling out of the sun.

Its frontal pressure-wave hurled us a mile into the wild sky. Breath stolen by termagant cortices, we tumbled in the grip

of a massive updraught, falling upwards. Priest was whisked away, his limbs jerking helplessly, still clutching the laser. Two Jane cried out in a thin loud voice, her hair tangled round her face. My arms cracked under the weight of the mad girl. With wind-streaming eyes, I watched the enormous black hull slide beneath us like a fish in deep water, its mammoth shadow obscuring the shattered buildings. The air shuddered in its wake.

It hit the ground like a bomb, and fell to pieces. Plumes of mist boiled up, filing our throats raw. Wreckage scattered over the face of London Melancholy: girders toppling end over end, miles of conduit exploding away like burst viscera, hull-plates the size of houses. A second shock-wave kicked us another thousand yards nearer the sun. Fay woke up and began to scream. Minor concussions flayed the surface of the mist; light flared as isolated bits of wreckage exploded; large sections rang like immense bells as they fell, demolishing those buildings that remained above the mist. A rolling brown fog of dust and debris enveloped me.

Abruptly, we entered a pocket of calmer air. Two Jane loomed through the wreathes of mist, choking. She spun, steadied herself, came close. Over her shoulder I could see Malice Priest zeroing in again.

"I'm the leader!" he was shouting. The laser fingered out, its beam a vague glowing line of hot dust-motes. Heat crawled across my temples. The Pit below and a madman above. I was tiring rapidly; the mere act of maintaining height had become painful. I was about to dive out and away despite the consequences when Jane held out her arms.

'Give her to me. I can make it.' she said. A pause. I stared at her foolishly. 'Quick! You want to be cut to shreds?' I might have argued the point, but just then a rising hum cut through the murk, and I felt a familiar lurch of reality.

A montage of incoherent images crept about my head. Down below, the dragonflies were leaving the wreck.

Priest was past realizing the danger. He stayed where he was, waving his free arm and firing off the laser at random. "I'm the boss," he called.

Huddled among the bent girders of a broken tower at the edge of the central plain, we watched them take him. The starship lay like a ruined eye, an immense split fruit, mist swirling about it as it settled into the earth. The ideographs on its hull fluoresced in the fading light, speaking of incredible journeys. Two or three miles beyond the main body of wreckage something blew up, the flat concussion muffled by the mist. The dragonflies: at first, they were nothing more than a thin, hesitant line ascending from the ruins, etched against the sky like a wisp of black smoke. But the wisp became a plume, and the plume a great writhing mushroom cloud, humming and moaning, rising with slow deliberation until the air was dark with them.

And above, a tiny frantic mote, fighting for height.

A mesh of laser-beams ignited the airborne dust in a brief splash of light. Then the periphery of the swarm engulfed him. They fastened on him: a darker speck coalesced, umbra within penumbra. Slowly there grew a well-defined black sphere, a globe of hunger, with Priest as its nucleus. And as it swelled, it began to sink through the ascending cloud, back towards the wreck.

'Oh God, they're horrible,' Two Jane put her face between her hands.

But they were already beginning to die in the alien air of Earth.

'I don't know,' I said. 'Not anymore. Priest was no loss. I just don't know.'

Fay Glass opened her blond eyes and looked straight into my head.

She smiled and whispered: 'Such a long way. And so many wings.'

NINE

Ring of Pain

He stumbled through the streets. Sad six o'clock light, strained through gaps in the torn chain link fencing. The wind eating into his bones, congealing in the joints. Stiff knees of another weary night. Eyes full of dust whipped out of dry gutters in quick little fawn feathers and eddies. Drank some water from an empty Coke tin – cold acid bite of rust. At the crest of the shattered wave of buildings – dip slope of squashed redbrick suburbia, scarp of derelict factories and imploded gasometers – he looked over the town. No smoke. Grey-pink haze at the periphery: just another bloody morning, plasma in the clouds, dissociated corpuscles in suspension. Look at me in a pool of yet unruffled water, cord scarecrow, hollows of straw hunger under the cheekbones (Christ, she said, I love your cheekbones, Celtic to the point of humour). Brave Caoite in a piece of smashed Warwickshire. He started down the hill, gusts plastered to his backbone. Remembering various breakfasts. Eat before they go cold, you know you hate them cold. Mother your

devilled kidney images sicken me, were it not for my vacuous belly, I would spew. The stink of a ruptured sewer, guts of the town digesting its last meal. The last meal. Supper.

Chainstore spilled on to the pavement, bright gilt bracelets, buttons, o pretty pretty. Bijou teeth of a freegift society wrapped in cellophane. Sale of shopsoiled goods – municipal buildings, pissoirs, beauty spots – all slightly marked, prices slashed.

Decorated himself with a string of plastic beads, but I what I need is a supermarket stuffed with erected sausages of polony. He thought. Coming upon a huge teddy bear in an alluvial fan of wrecked vinyl armoured cars, this teddy bright and only slightly wet from three days' exposure, but splitting at its seams, perhaps with laughter. You will rot eventually, Ursa Minor, rot. (Kicking it in a fit of masterful pique – sawdust surrogate companionship – watch that broken-necked arc, St. Andrew-crucified into the gloom of collapsed tills. Poor teddy.)

Finally found a Sainsbury's, helped himself to a pink carrier bag. Invented an assistant – short, blonde, busty. The name is Kristodulos, put it down on my account. He ferreted behind the counter among the tins with an albino patina of powdered plaster, rubbed the stuff off with his thumb. Steak. Very nice. Rubbed some more. What use have I for rice pudding in this alien city? I have forgotten how the streets run, gastronomy means nothing to me among this unjointed topography. Spurning the tin.

Weighed down with tins of steak, he walked. Looking. Swinging a jaunty pink carrier.

Midday folded a cold curtain on him, glacial rain, batwing clouds scudding overhead. Crushed into the corner of an L of upright masonry, he unwrapped scenes of his fantasy existence as Kristodulos the Greek, snugbug behind his windbreak, allowing the fire of dismembered dress-shop

mannequins to evaporate the rain before it prickled his scalp. Sometimes. He had considered raping the dummies but contented himself merely chastely lifting a skirt here, unbuttoning a blouse there, they did not impress him. Scraggy besides being unyielding. They burned fitfully and smelt disgusting. So much for the lapsed morals of the aftermath society. He counted the beads on his necklace. There were 42. Fished the tins out of the fire with tender fingers, leaving them to cool in the rain. (We fished that stream for speckled trout, barbecued them to the hum of crepuscular insects. Hell said Zak, I go for this outdoor thing.) (Masturbating at night in the quiet tent.) He dug his hands up to the knuckles into the warm, viscid meat. The rain fell harder. The wind bit his ears.

Gazing at the charcoal sky, the meat a memory in his mouth. A palpable loneliness invaded the L, gathered at its arsis, 90 degrees of solitude, a quarter of the circle. Bisected, it would provide room for two. He toyed with the idea of importing another mannequin, but the thought of being impaled on its uncompromising eyes deterred him. God send me a vinyl succubus – feeling the heat in his groin – no, forget that. It isn't a question of going to Hell for it, more a question of being allowed out if you don't do it. Incipient self-pity punched holes in his brain. Prognosis: ultimately insular suicide of a scatter-crow, beanstick bones at once its support and crucifixion, Jesus but I don't want to be here, I don't want this to have happened, nononono. Unfortunately, it did. Determined, he held out in his empty L, waiting for the rain to stop. By the time that happened, the mannequins had burned out and he was soaked. He mourned the loss of his dignity. Picked up his jolly carrier bag.

Pale sun washed the quiet islets, rumoured in his hair as he walked among them. These eyots were prolapsed semis, occasionally forming continental masses where the units had all fallen the same way, peninsulas at corners. He

walked, limped, hopped hunchback fashion, swinging the carrier. Still looking. How long does it take with blistered feet to chart the planchic doldrums. Wading the talus of shifting brick on ball-joint ankles. Bell-like grind and slip of broken tiles under dusty boots, dust i' the air, no rain is ever going to lay the dust of this relapsed conurbation. This is where they caught county town red buses to surveyors' offices and the scarp industrials. They had umbrellas and snotty nosed kids in primrose yellow dresses and kept smooth chestnut ponies in chrome green fields at the edge of the development. Hunting Warwickshire. He heard a song. Slipped on the flaked shale of a kitchen unit, crashed on to his coccyx, ignored the fingernail of pain scraping delicately up his spine.

Heard a song.

Lying splayed like a votive offering on the wilderness of brick, belaboured his ears with the heels of his hands, frantically thinking I've cracked, this is where it begins.

And this vice, singing out its song as if here was some wild Gaelic foreshore, Balmacara maybe, singing up out of the rubble a little way ahead. He – hearing the haunted waves in this song, wordless waves – scrabbled to his feet. Run, stumble. Forgot the carrier, stagger back for the tins of steak, all the time this wordless voice, taking wild modal trills and grace notes in its compulsive stride. Rubble fell away from under him, landslipping him into a cellar underworld, chipping at his elbows and knees. Threshed up and on, blood running into his eyes, seeing some mad island girl dancing bone-naked on a pink beach at dawn (it could almost be like that again, stinking shipping basins silting under, the pipeline orgasm of sewage cut off, no more caravan sites or childshit among the dunes). Suddenly recovering his voice, croaking to the owner of the song, keep singing, don't stop. Hurling over the betrayal of slate, squawking like a tattered crow in a damp pasture after rain. And finding her.

Tumbling in a ridiculous heap at the unbelievable feet of her, and she standing shocked above him surrounded by three fortuitously erect walls. The carrier burst and rolled tins of steak around her feet in an insane little dance, labels shouting in the sun. Struck dumb, he licked the blood off his lips and looked at her. Paralysed by the uncertainty of the miracle.

A thin dirty angel of the broken suburbs, no wings but breasts like apples. Like breasts. And legs (thighs by definition) in torn slut-beautiful stockings. A face which meant everything and nothing, because it could have been any face.

Please don't go away, lady.

I brought you some tins.

Isn't it wonderful, she said, to have found each other, and now we have this all to ourselves, there's nobody else.

Slumped before a comfortable fire, crammed to the larynx with steak, his head pillowed on her loins, watching Sirius twinkletwinkle with cold energy through a rift in the cirro-cumulus and an orbit in the wall. Cautiously running a hand along her calf: Yes. You're so laconic, she continued, tangling light fingers in his hair – Why, we could do anything, go away and live off the land in some quiet place. Shifting his position so his cheek rested at the magical nexus of belly and thighs: Yes, I suppose. She bending at the waist, so that her breasts through the thin dress touched his other cheek, capturing him in the foetal curve of her body and him thinking we were always so naked under the clothes and the ceilings, so open to it all, when all the time all of us could have had this pleasant imprisonment, never bothering about bunkers or contraceptives. Kris, she said (why didn't I tell her my real name? What the Hell, she has my identity), you aren't listening to a word. We'll go to the sea – he agreed silently, rubbing his ear against her, straining for the labial message – and raise children and

Children.

He sprung up. Galvanized. Saw his every projected idyll snatched away on the wail of a red wrinkled scrap clawing in horrendous technicolour from her loins. And the primitive brood, years later, fragmenting incestuously to begin the sordid ghastly business again. First caves then prefabs. Flint arrows to germ warfare in a record 2,00 years. Silver to chrome. And at the wellspring of it all, himself, a second Persse O'Reilly, the patriarch, the sublime blunder. What's the matter, she cried.

New politicians, religions; inquisitions, resurrections; frictions, factions and strife.

Primary school, he yelled – and an R&B adolescence. Acadia Grove and No Smoking; tiled public bogs and tired public servants. Lime trees and Sunday morning cars and hunting women. Gagging, he ran. Beyond the walls, the wind incised his legs, moaned coldly among the amorphous wreckage. The moon was a bloated womb. God, he thought, policemen, bank managers, headmasters, thrones, principalities, and powers. Lavatory paper and government flimsies. He tripped over a smashed sink, vomited with relief on the cold derelict residues of it all, fantasized a hundred acid-pushers, charitable institutions and mental health hospitals receiving his spew of rejection. Tottered upright on to rubber knees and thence to intractable feet. Starlight shattered on the enormous devastation around him. He ran into the wonderful inscrutable darkness of the death of the town. Her huge grief followed him into the dark, then attenuated abruptly.

He was a reality in the barbed morning after a night of visions of a disintegrated neo-Malthusian Hell. When he woke in the dismal shelter of the L, he was trembling and and the pale sky was a needle in his resinous eyes. Retinal acupuncture. Something other than the cold had crept in under his flesh during the spectral night. The dawn wind

froze his outside while his bones stewed and ached, and his head moved in a lax orbit around a complex of synaesthetic pain. Bruises and lacerations, his knees peeled raw under the corduroy. His throat haunted by the ghost of vomit, metallic. His rusty palate. The beads rattled as he moved. Poor teddy. He passed out. Civilizations of gargantuan Guignols muttered through his head, and forebodings of Empyrean war.

Twelve noon again. The downpour lashed in believable curtains across the barrens and drumlins of ochre brick, gusts whipping into the L. Water collected in the hollows of his collar bones and his ignited skeleton boiled the sweat out of his forehead. He felt for the pink carrier bag, remembered it gone. There was no fire except in his body, his sad corpus. In a lull in the rain, he dragged himself to the couturier for fuel. He was forced to dismember the chosen mannequin. Lug it in weary stages across the intervening desert of the street with frequent rests to the haven of the L. Pile the limbs in a Gothic heap, prop the swan necked torso against the wall for further reference. The head watched him haughtily. He slept again, unable to get the pile burning. This time they were chasing him down Sheep Street with painless castrators and he lunged into the sanctuary of the church and was caught. At damp twilight the air bit his abrasions and he caught 2-stroke fuel leaking from a bent pump in one of the empty steak tins. Threw it on to the heap of limbs, seared the backs of his hands in the consequent whoomph of flame. Unable to eat because of the molten steel in his jaw, he crossed syllogistic swords with the torso of the mannequin, whom he now perceived to be a haute couture reincarnation of Ushen the Wanderer. Casting himself as St. Patrick and pointing out the fires of retribution of the Fenian Men as typified by the burning limbs. The last ring of pain, my friend, and not a sight of the elfin breasts of Niam.

She stood over him in the morning gloom, the framework of her face mapped in grime. Two white runnels of tear erosion, eyes liquid sympathy. He tried to run away again. Milled about with hapless legs like a cockroach on its back. With frantic haste. But she was unavoidable and brought him water and canned soup which his body refused to refuse. He caught himself many times sinking into huge pleasures of warm words, never mind, better soon. And indeed the phantoms seceded from his skull, protestant before her kindness, and he was better soon.

Why did you run away?

Why?

He struggled, waving semaphore arms. Thickly: Can't let it happen again. (Possibly she understood.) Our duty to die fruitless, orgasms to splash and dry on the wreckage. Offering to the megadead.

(All this through the afternoon in a low voice, straining to convince her with portraits of the long blind climb back through Toynbee, weary cycles ending in. This.)

And then the sacrament of the night, panting and sweating under Sirius, he grasping her and realizing that it could never be beaten, raking hot into her and knowing that it could never be ended.

Even by the morning of steel helmets and tanks shaking the L, and the lean profiles of bayonets.

Until Niam cut off those breasts.

TEN

The Causeway

'Nobody has been here for a hundred years. Why should you take an interest?'

Crome didn't know, He had been bored with travel and almost frightened by the immense distance of his home.

'You can get sick of stars,' he said.

'We can't be helped, you know. You should go back where you came.' She swept an arm vaguely across an arc of sky, attributing to him several unlikely points of origin. The Heavy Stars: surely she didn't think he came from there. Firelit, her face was beautiful, strange.

'People have have tried. We don't want you here. Don't you see we are ashamed?'

He got up, planning to turn his back on her abruptly, evince some powerful emotion, shock her.

'The migration begins tomorrow,' she said.

He sighed, walked away a few paces.

'You should leave before then,' she called after him calmly.

He thought it might be some kind of adolescent pose, evidence of uncertainty. He looked back at her thin, appealing form behind the fire: her robe was tinted orange by the dying flames, and a heat shimmer distorted her. He shrugged.

‘I’m going to take you away from here whether you want to go or not,’ he said. ‘This entire planet is a madhouse.’

There were things he didn’t quite understand, but even after a week of her evasions, he was sure she had no husband.

A little after dawn the next morning, lured by the continuing enigma of the causeway, Crome flew his queer machine over to the coast.

It was a hundred kilometer trip, and the landscape was as quietly resigned as its inhabitants. Low hills, worn drumlins, coarse grass and bracken, the odd thorn or bullace bent by the prevailing wind: it was tired and passive, sparsely populated, and prone to slow, drizzling rains. He found it vastly irritating.

The causeway he had discovered as he made his final braking run some weeks before. Its apparent length had impressed him immediately, but he had been too occupied with his instruments to give it attention. Since then he had come to believe it crossed some thousands of kilometers of ocean, linking two large continents. But he preferred to leave that simply as a possibility, and he had never flown its length.

The villagers could not be persuaded to talk about it. He knew they hadn’t built it.

Settling the machine above the tideline, he gazed blankly through a porthole; tapped his fingers for a moment, three against four. These visits were an indulgence: not that he had any reason to feel guilty.

It was a shingle beach, a vista of grey ovoid pebbles stretching to the uneasy sea. The wind blew his hair into his

face, the pebbles scraped and shifted beneath his feet. Black gulls were squabbling over the terminal massif of the causeway; circling, mewling, dipping down to the access-ramp hidden among the dunes; furious quanta of energy in a static panorama.

He began as always by trying to make some sense out of the immense age of the structure, poking desultorily about where the great uneven granite blocks grew out of the bedrock of the shore. Far back in the gaps between the stones were traces of old, crude mortar. The thing reared thirty metres above him, its shadow cold. He was overpowered by Time, and soon grew tired.

He prised some small crustaceans away from the green, slimy surface beneath the high-water lines, but later threw them back into the water.

He wandered through the dunes to the access-ramp and found that the gulls had been mobbing a larger bird. Its white feathers were bloody and disordered, its metre-and-a-half span of wing limp and ineffectual. He wondered why it had not escaped by flying. He thought once that it moved – saw himself washing it in the sea, taking it back to the village as a present for the girl – but it was quite dead.

Up on top, the wind seemed to pluck harder at his clothes, and if he looked down suddenly, he tended to lose his balance.

The road itself had a much smoother surface than the rest of the structure, a completed look. He stood at the exact spot where the ramp become horizontal, and stared down the long grey perspective.

I am standing at the very beginning, he thought. Right here.

The road had a slightly convex surface and no walls. There were cracks, but he could ignore them, particularly in the middle-distance, where they vanished in the haze. The causeway was enormous beneath his feet, a tenuous link with the barely perceptible horizon.

The seas was choppy.

He saw something that made him hurry back down the ramp.

Seaward of the shingle where he had grounded the machine, the retreating tide had exposed a strip of sand. Along it, from the south, meandered a line of footprints, dark and haphazard against the glistening surface. They were already losing definition as the waterlogged sand sank back into a plane.

An old, hunched figure was making its way hesitantly over the the pebbles. There was nothing male or female about its long dirty coat, or the way the wind plucked at it. It stopped every so often to stoop awkwardly, grub about, and put something in a wicker basket beneath its arm. Reaching Crome's machine, it halted abruptly; took a pace back, peering.

After a moment, it set the basket down, spat, and shook its fist irritably at the obstruction.

Crome's boots thudded on the access-ramp – each footfall exploding along his bones – and sprayed grey sand as he entered the dunes, his arms cartwheeling.

'Oy!' he shouted.

He looked down and saw that he was going to tread in the dead bird. He tried to change direction in mid-stride: fell heavily and rolled down the side of the dune, marram whipping his face. When he had picked himself up, he found that the figure with the basket had gone, and left no footprints in the shingle. He crushed several small, active dune-bugs that had got into his clothing.

He lifted his machine on its chemical engines, trawled north and south along the beach, and made four or five passes over the causeway environs. Nothing was moving there but the marram and the mad, speedy gulls, so he flew back to the village to clarify what the girl had told him the night

before. Below him, the land was lost, diffused by drizzle, a watercolour applied too wet.

He closed the portholes.

The village was empty. A few sheep huddled in an irregular field and panicked when he landed. A discarded length of unbleached cloth looped down one street in the wind; in another, a cat stalked something he couldn't quite see. Hunched into his clothes against the rain, he quartered the place, carrying a small, powered megaphone.

'Halloo!' he shouted. There were no answers, and the buildings hardly answered.

The villagers were defined here, in the absence of tension between village and landscape. The single storey bans and cottages were comfortably weathered, their edges blurred by accumulations of moss and lichen. Crome shivered, wishing for a less vernacular architecture, a severity of line that might provide a reply to the organic dreariness of the landscape, if not a defence against it.

The cat had vanished.

All the dwellings were carefully shut up, neat and deserted, dim and chilly inside. He entered every other one – knocking loudly on each door before he opened it – and found nothing more to do than fiddle with domestic implements or poke through chests of clean, abandoned linen. In the girl's home, there was no message for him.

Soot stirred and rustled in the chimney as he examined some of her personal garments. He put his megaphone down by a wooden cruet that stood on the scrubbed table and compared them as expressions of purpose.

Along the ledge above the fireplace marched a curious little procession of clay figures, crudely painted in bright colours.

Where have they all gone? He thought. He felt offended to discover she had been telling the truth about that.

The cat reappeared as he left, rubbing itself briefly against his leg. It purred as he walked away, and slipped into her house without looking after him, 'You're too late.' Rain

dripped steadily into stone sinks outside each cottage, soft water for washing the healthy, peasant hair of the women.

During the latter part of the morning, he discovered that the migration was general: drifting in and out of low cloud cover, he watched the moorland villages emptying themselves smoothly on to the major road of the province via a loose network of unsurfaced lanes. After two or three hours a caravan several kilometers long had formed beneath him, a long blind animal moving very slowly towards the sea.

In the afternoon, seeking a familiar analogue for the abandoned villages, he set up a microfilm projector and ran archive footage of DRBIIIB, the Refugee Cluster.

While the girl and her fellow-villagers remained a separate unit, he hovered above them; but by twilight the caravan had absorbed them, and he was forced down. A fine rain hissed across the heath on an easterly wind, beading the dull shell of his machine like condensation on a black grape. Migrants streamed past him as he stood shivering by the road.

Their faces were empty and similar, their gait uniform; they were dressed in coarse wool; some of them carried small bundles. They rarely spoke among themselves, and affected not to notice him at all (Originally he had parked the machine in the centre of the road ahead of them, hoping to to focus attention his arrival: but they had simply split into two columns and flowed past on either side, scattering silently when he throttled up and lifted off again.) It was a dull pilgrimage. The children that gazed incuriously at him or the machine would look away as soon as he smiled. A dull pilgrimage, he thought.

Three-quarters of the caravan passed.

'Here I am!' he shouted.

Her expression was calm and contained, in repose despite a frame of damp, stringy hair: it recalled vividly the tired, bucolic fatalism of the older villagers. She raised her arm

briefly to wipe rain from the hollows of her cheeks; ignored him. She was entirely involved with walking. Her robe clung wetly to the small of her back, like the paint on a cheap madonna.

A village boy was walking at her left side, a big, graceless adolescent wearing bulky agricultural sabots. The nape of his neck was red and soft. He kept reaching back there with blunt fingers, to scratch at an incipient boil.

Crome hurried along and fell into step on her right. He caught her arm.

“It’s me.”

‘Please go away. I told you we can’t be-’

‘All right,’ he admitted, ‘I’m not interested in the rest of them. Why on earth are you offing off with them like this?’

‘It’s just something we do.’

‘Here,’ said the boy suddenly, craning his neck to peer at Crome. ‘Why don’t you pee off? You can see she doesn’t want to listen to that stuff.’ His lips were thick and strong. Curly yellow hairs sprouted in clumps from his chin and cheekbones.

‘Look-’

Crome tugged at the girl’s sleeve ‘-leave this stupid procession. It’s all right for these people.’ He indicated the boy.

She shook his hand away. ‘No.’

‘You heard her,’ said the boy. ‘Bugger off.’ He touched her shoulder possessively. He pointed a belligerent finger at Crome, showed his teeth. ‘We don’t want you here. She doesn’t want you, either. Sorry.’

‘Christ!’ shouted Crome. ‘Who *is* this? What is he to you?’ He waved his arms.

Tonelessly, she said, ‘This is Gabriel.’

The boy blushed and grinned stupidly. ‘Yes.’ He licked his lips. ‘And don’t hurry back,’ he told Crome.

‘You said nothing about this to me. Why haven’t I seen him before? Oh, for God’s sake stop fooling about. Come on.’ He

had lost patience with her. 'He's a village idiot!'

Gabriel worked his lips around and spat. He stepped agilely round to Crome's side of the girl, dusting his hands. 'Do you want it willing, or not?' he hissed. He clutched at Crome's clothing and dragged him bodily out of the column. 'It makes no bloody difference to me, then.'

The migrants behind milled about. One of them stumbled over Crome's feet. They closed the gap and walked, hardly looking at him.

Out on the peat-moss he tore himself loose. The wind cut at him. The boy came very close. 'How do you want it? Well then?' He grinned. Ropes of spittle linked his upper and lower incisors. His face was pink and healthy. He rolled up his sleeves, flexed his knees, and tested his footing on the moss.

'I'm not sure what you mean,' said Crome.

'You wet little sod.'

Gabriel drew one foot back and lashed out. It was so quick: the heavy wooden sabot hit Crome just below the knee. His leg gave way abruptly as the blow shuddered along his bones. He yelled involuntarily and fell forward into the moss. He squirmed and looked up. The boy was grinning at him. 'Want any more? I've hurt strong men with these clogs.' He laughed.

Crome let his head settle back. Brackish water squeezed out of the moss ran into his mouth. His shin wasn't broken, but the whole leg was trembling violently. He had wet himself. He knew the girl was standing over him, too.

'I watched you for a week,' he said. 'You had nobody in the village.'

'He's been away.'

Gabriel came between them. 'You quite sure you don't want any more of that?' And, when Crome looked away ritually, shaking his head (full of fear but thinking, You arrogant bastard); 'Fair enough then.'

He nodded equably and took the girl's arm.

Crome rubbed his bad leg, stood up. He let them move off a little way in the direction of the procession, then followed, limping. His light boots made very little noise on the moss. He locked both his hands together and swung them into the nape of the boy's red neck. Then he stumbled the half-kilometer to his queer vehicle, looking back through the rain and the gathering dark to watch humiliated as the girl knelt over her collapsed youth.

The migrants were still walking, unpoliced and orderly; impassive. All through the night, they registered on his detectors: the populations of outlying villages, coming on late but steady behind the main body.

He kept track of the caravan, although by now he was quite certain of its destination. The obsessive plodding of the villagers moved him to a mixture of fury and elation; and emotion which, paradoxically, affected him most when they stopped.

At noon, he would fly over their heads as they lit their cooking fires, putting the machine through hesitation rolls and daring outside loops; when he went transonic they fell down like curious little wooden dolls, hands clamped over their ears. After nightfall, he hovered beneath the cloudline injecting powdered cerium into his exhaust venturi and firing off red parachute flares.

But he grew bored as they came within striking distance of the coast. On the third day since his discovery of the abandoned village, he returned to the causeway.

Down where the tide slapped the granite, spindrift rose in fast spectral arcs; up over the access-ramp the gulls spun and sideslipped furiously, shedding feathers; but the causeway buttresses and the immense roadway absorbed all that – they glistened, they hummed faintly with accumulated Time.

Recalling his last experience on the shore, Crome resumed his search for the old beachcomber, scouring the sand for

footprints. He found nothing.

He decided on stealth, he hid behind a buttress.

He caught the sod throwing stones at his machine.

'Stop that!' he shouted, as the vehicle's hull rang sullenly.

Coat flapping and cracking wildly in the wind, the beachcomber ignored him. Gnarled, liver-spotted hands scrabbled energetically in the shingle. Crome left his cover, came closer, and the previous sexual ambivalence of the figure resolved: it was a man, with chin-whiskers and a rheumy eye.

'Come off it!' Crome yelled. 'I want you!'

The old man twitched. He looked challengingly at Crome, and threw another stone, the billowing coat lending his motions a mad energy. He cackled and turned to escape. His basket lay on the shingle: he tried to pick it up on the move, stumbled, and fell down in a vile storm of rags and flailing limbs. He looked up at Crome, panting.

'You wouldn't hurt an old man?'

Crome helped him up.

'I just wanted to ask you some things..'

'Oh, ah.' His teeth were brown and sticky. His hands ran over him like tired piebald crabs, picking at his thighs and crotch. He bent down, clutched his basket firmly to his chest. He eyed Crome slyly. 'You wouldn't *steal* from an old man?'

'No. Look, you must have lived here for years. What do you know about the causeway?'

He squinted. 'Eh? Oh, that. I know all about that, all right.'

He plucked at Crome's sleeve, drew him close and whispered: 'You come a long way, then?' He chuckled. 'Oh, I could tell you some tales about *that*. Pee your pants.' He wiped his noes on the back of his hand. 'Ah.'

'Yes?' said Crome.

'What? Now you look here at this, for instance-' He offered Crome his basket. 'You're an honest lad. Take a look at this,'

It was full of white pebbles. They were uniformly ovoid and smooth. They averaged six or seven centimeters long. Wet

sand adhered to some of them.

'These here.' he said, 'is eggs.'

He seemed to notice Crome's machine again.

He grimaced and spat at it. He shook both fists. When Crome stepped forward to prevent him from picking up another stone, a vacant, silly look of fear crossed his face. He dropped the basket and ran off, reaching the dune without looking back. He scrambled up it with amazing agility.

'Bloody *eggs*!' he shouted, and vanished.

Crome stirred some of the split pebbles with his foot., He looked bitterly round at the inert landscape. He went back to the machine and modified some equipment.

Up on the causeway.

During the evening, the wind had risen and cleared the cloud cover, revealing odd configurations of stars. One moon came up, hazed faintly by wisps of fast-travelling cirro-stratus. The tide rose and bit the shingle. The wind gave the darkness a sense of motion, but the causeway was heavy, inorganic. Moonlit, the cracks in the roadway made a strange, communicative web, Crome, standing on the access-ramp, felt that given time he might have understood.

Behind him, a mechanical voice was counting out seconds.

At *sixty* the causeway groaned and shuddered.

Two kilometers ahead, the road lifted itself into a one-in-one gradient, bent like a neck, and flew apart. Bits of masonry floated upwards, silhouetted against an inverted cone of white light. Crome threw his tools into the sea. The wave-front of the explosion rocked him. Smoke and dust streamed past like weed in a shallow river.

He shook his head.

In the moment before the demolition charge fired he had imagined he could see along the whole, immense length of the causeway to the opposing shore; as if he had the power to overcome horizons.

He lifted off into turbulence above the area of collapse. The machine yawed, spun slowly: dirty steam shrouded it as the sea boiled through a thirty-metre gap in the ancient masonry.

He turned his back and ran inland at Mach 2, trailing more concussions.

That night he further limited the options of the column, visiting the moorland with plastic explosives and improvised detonators. He mined key roads and bridges until just before dawn, working in the fitful red glare of the erupting villages.

In the dark hinterland there was nothing wholly human. Crome found a six-kilometre animal noising hesitantly at the dunes, directed by some uncomfortable instinct to find a way through. Its head broke suddenly into a hundred component parts as it felt about for the route buried in the shifting sands.

By the time he had settled the machine on the shingle the road had been rediscovered: with a curious gritty rustling of feet, the main body of the column was spilling onto the access-ramp of the causeway. Faces disturbed him, passing in the pre-dawn chill. The children were alien, tired. He suspected that the column had been moving all night.

The wind hissed in the marran. A faint band of viridian light appeared above the eastern horizon. It struck wickedly off the line of a jaw, the side of a neck, limned the causeway buttresses like dawn in an underworld.

It was still too dark to see well. Crome waited for the girl. He mistook other women for her; stopped them; found himself staring horrified into unknown peasant eyes. They were strong, they pulled away from him without a word. Growing frightened of them, he clambered up the side of a tall dune to wait out the inevitable confusion and retreat. He decided to approach the girl with his final offer somewhere on the return journey.

The sky paled. High chains of cloud broke free of the horizon and came on purposefully, reflecting magenta and burnt orange. Seabirds began dogfighting above the causeway, wailing as they shot the blackened gap left by Crome's bomb.

The column hesitated. It compacted itself into a third of its original size. Crome sniggered. Along the submerged dune road came a few infirm stragglers, murmuring dully. They wedged themselves on to the access-ramp, pushing against the motionless backs of the main body. Their legs attempted walking motions. Some of them collapsed.

Two kilometers out, the leaders of the caravan faced a heavy sea. They moved their heads bemusedly from side to side, squinting at the mad black gulls.

'Why aren't you migrating?' called Crome derisively.

He raced down to the machine and found his little electric megaphone.

'Why aren't you?' he boomed. He laughed.

He was floundering back up the face of the dune for a better look when the first of the villagers stepped calmly off the lip of the cavity and fell into the water; and by the time he had reached the top the column was moving again, faster and faster.

ELEVEN

The Bringer with the Window

TRACK ONE: AT THE BISTRO CALIFORNIUM.

The burning takes place next day, on an amethyst and emerald lifting-platform, high up in gray turbulent air, drifting. The gathered crowd—in Happy-Day motley: yellow pantaloons, jewels, flame-red saris—roars and whispers, an inland sea of laughter, as oily smoke begins to rise from the gaudy pyre. Birkin Grif and Lamia, the woman without skin, are amused but unimpressed.

“I was burned at Pompeii in such a jeweled gown. Man, these plebs have missed much, having been lost all these puritan centuries.” Her dentures twinkle, her beautiful arteries pulse. Birkin Grif eyes her patronizingly: skinless, she is not nude but naked, more naked ever than a woman can be when merely divested of clothes. He possesses her every function with his single eye, piratical.

“True,” says he. “But Gomorrah was best, there was a good burning there.” She laughs, and her laugh is naked too. Sparks issue from the gemmed platform to an appreciative roar from the crowd. Birkin Grif slaps his titanium thigh in huge enjoyment.

“Jeanne d’ Arc,” says the skinless woman.

“Hiroshima,” he counters.

“Virgil Grissom,” she laughs.

"Buchenwald," murmurs Birkin Grif.

Lost in delightful reminiscence, they watch the platform with its cargo of burning emperor, two ancient lovers in a crowd; he old with debauchery, she young with it. A drunken woman, her head bejeweled from crown to forehead, staggers from the press.

"Whoop!"

"Indeed, madam," says Birkin Grif, always the wag. "Were you not at Nagasaki in the Spring? Did I not see you there?" The drunken woman narrows her eyes.

"How d'you spell it, baby?"

Birkin Grif ogles her with his good eye.

"G-U-I-L-T," he intimates.

Skinless Lamia sniffs petulantly and nudges him in the ribs.

"Why are we here? Why are we here at all, this is not where it's at. We have a date in Californium."

They leave the crowd to heave and sweat. The platform is being lowered so that the burning emperor's retinue of harlots can be put aboard. Birkin Grif limps plausibly; his skinless sweetheart is a distillate of timeworn nakedness: false teeth and bijou eyebrows her slight concessions to fashion.

PAUSE THE FIRST.

Welcome to the chrome-plastic uterus of the Bistro Californium, haunt well-beloved and dear watering-place of all the intellectual parodies and artistic mock-ups of the splendid city.

See: here is Kristodulos, the blind painter; a brush dipped in cochineal is placed behind his ear. He is listening to the color of his Negress, Charmian with the scarred ritual breasts. Here too is Adolf Ableson (Junior) the spastic poet of Viriconium. See how his chromium hand grips the pencil with metallic fervor, how his head nods, driven by some bent escapement in his neck. And here; here at this table, thirsting after the hungry snows; here is Jiro-San, the hermaphrodite lute-player—shut in a tower of loneliness, separated by the accusation of mutability from Mistress Seng, she of the lapis-lazuli eyes—carven, nay (no no no) graven, from a bronze sunburn.

O you pedestrian seekers-after-color: come, gaze...

Enter Birkin Grif and Lamia his skinless lover. They sit at a table of translucent rose glass, wink and nod knowingly at companions-in-knowingness. Faintly, the whisper of the crowd at the Incineration sifts into the Bistro Californium, soft little flakes of sound. Kristodulos colors it black, makes a mental note. The

chromium poet scribbles and having writ, moves on. Only our lute-player is deaf, because—suntanned—he is occupied with his head full of snow.

“Shall we take tea?”

Smiling, they take tea out of gold-leaved porcelain.

TRACK TWO: WHO IS DR. GRISHKIN?

“It is I will conduct you.”

Birkin Grif looks up. This voice owns a fat and oily face, faintly gray. In the face is placed with artistic but ungeometrical accuracy, a small rosebud mouth, attempting to beam. One understands immediately that the mouth is indigenous to this kind of face, but that the smile is not. There are violet oblique eyes; no eyebrows or hair. The voice has a body too: pear-shaped, draped in plum-colored suiting, and very plump. The plum-colored suit is slit to reveal a surgical window set into its owner’s stomach. Behind the window, interesting things are happening.

This voice—along with its corpus—is the essence of every brothel and fornication of the universe: the voice of a glorious, immortal and Galactic pimp; the ultimate in carnal, carnival, and carnivorous invitations.

“My friend,” says Birkin Grif. “Mon ami: have I not seen you before? A whorehouse in Alexandria? Istamboul?

Birmingham? No?” The newcomer smiles with a sort of lecherous modesty.

“Perhaps...ah, but that was a millennium hence, we have progressed since then, we have become...civilized.” He shrugs.

“Does it matter?” asks Birkin Grif.

“Nothing matters, my piratical friend: but that is not the point: I am Dr. Grishkin.”

“Is that the point?”

“No, that is something altogether different. May I join you?”

And he sits down, leering at the woman without skin. This is a leer that makes her feel naked. There is a hiatus. He pours himself tea. He has a strong sense of drama, this Dr. Grishkin: he is well-versed in the technique of the dramatic pause. Birkin Grif becomes impatient.

“Dr. Grishkin, we...”

Grishkin raises an admonitory finger. He sips tea. He points to his surgical window. Birkin Grif watches it, fascinated.

"The ash-flats," intones Dr. Grishkin: and, having dropped his conversational bomb, sits back to watch its effect.

Horror. Silence. Tension drips viscous from the Californium ceiling. Far off, the crowd whispers. Nothing so dramatic has happened in Californium for a decade.

"I am to take you to the ash-flats of Wisdom."

Skinless Lamia shudders ever so slightly. Into the silence fall three perfect silver notes. Jiro-San has taken up his lute.

"I think I have changed my mind," she whispers.

"It is too late, all is arranged," says Dr. Grishkin. "You must come, now it is inevitable that you come." There is the slightest edge of annoyance to his voice. This annoyance is persuasive. One feels that Dr. Grishkin had gone to much trouble to...bring things about. He does not wish to be disappointed.

"But will He be there?" asks Birkin Grif, anxiously. "There is little sense in risking so much if He is not there."

Comes the answer: "There is little sense in anything, Mr. Grif. But He will be there. He has sent me." He sips tea. It is so simple, the way he puts it, it seems already an accomplished fact: but then, his oily job is to simplify, to smooth the way. Lamia leans forward, speaks from the corner of her mouth, the perfect conspirator. Dr. Grishkin finds her skinned proximity delightfully disturbing, her aorta distinctly beautiful.

"The Image-Police, Dr. Grishkin: what of them?"

"Pure paranoia, dear lady. There is nothing very illegal about a little trip to the edge of Wisdom. Just to the edge, you understand, merely a sightseeing trip: a little pleasant tourism..." He leers. "Shall we go?"

They leave. The fat man waddles. Birkin limps. The skinless lady is sinuous. As they pass Jiro-San's table, he gazes wistfully. He finds Birkin very handsome.

TRACK THREE: THE ASH-FLATS OF WISDOM.

Wisdom is a wilderness. Long ago, there was a war here; or perhaps it was a peace. Most of the time there is but small difference between the two; love and hate lean so heavily upon one another, and both are possessed of a monstrous ennui. Certainly, something destroyed whatever Wisdom was: so well that no one has known its former nature for two centuries. From its border one can see little but sense much.

Birkin Grif and the skinless woman stand shivering there in a cold wind, peering through the mesh fence that separates city-ground and forbidden ash. Their cloaks—black for him, gray for her—flutter nervously. Soft flakes of ash fill the air about them with dark snow. Grishkin is huge in voluminous purple, talking animatedly to a grayface guard outside his olive-drab sentry box. Meanwhile,

the desolation seems to whisper, You have no business here, everything here is dead.

There is a bleak sadness to this waste, a bereavement: it mourns. Eidetic images of ghosts flit on this wind: women weeping weave shrouds at ebbtide; famine-children wail to old men at twilight. Here there are two kinds of chill, and cloaks will not keep out both.

Abruptly, Grishkin takes out a small silver mechanism, and points it at the guard. There is an incredible blue flash. The body of the guard drops, improbably headless, jetting dark blood from the venturi of its neck. Dr. Grishkin vomits apologetically: a sick valediction. He returns, wiping his mouth on a canary-yellow handkerchief.

"You see? There is no problem, as I have said." He retches, his fat face white. "Oh dear. Excuse me, do excuse me. I grow old, I grow old you know. Poor boy. He has a mother in Australia. He was exported."

"How sad," says Lamia. She is gazing at Dr. Grishkin's heaving stomach through the surgical window. She feels quite sympathetic. "Sympathy is so quaint," she tinkles. "Poor Dr. Grishkin."

Poor Dr. Grishkin, his spasm over, takes out his little glittering mechanism again, and aims it at the fence round Wisdom. The incredible-blue-flash performance is repeated, whereupon the mesh curls and congeals like burning hair.

"Pretty," observes the skinless woman.

"Impressive," admits Birkin Grif. In the charred sentry-box bells begin to ring.

"Now we must hurry," intimates Dr. Grishkin, and his voice is more than faintly urgent. "Leg it!" He begins to waddle hurriedly toward a charcoal dune. They follow him through the broken mesh. The wind rises, whipping up small, stinging cinders. Cloaks fluttering, they top the rise and drop flat, facing the way they have come. A great turmoil of ash-flakes hides the sentry-box.

"The wind will have erased our tracks," says Birkin Grif.

"Correct as ever, mon frère," returns fat Dr. Grishkin. "Officially, we have just died, nobody will bother us now." He leers. "I have been dead these ten years." He laughs mordantly. His stomach trembles behind its window. Birkin Grif and his skinless mistress are unamused.

"Why does the ash never blow into the city?" asks Lamia.

"Come," orders Grishkin, eyeing the weather with distaste.

PAUSE THE SECOND. FOR NARRATIVE PURPOSES THE ASH STORM ABATES.

Led by the seraphic murderer Grishkin, they flit like majestic moths—purple, gray, black—over the long low swells of ash.

This land is empty, composed visually of utterly balanced sweeps of gray, shading from the dead cream to the mystic charcoal. Slow watercourses cut the ubiquitous ash, silting swiftly, meandering, beds infinitely variable. Wind and water make Wisdom unchartable: age and the wind make it cripplingly lonely. Time is overthrown in Wisdom: its very mutability is immutable.

Thinks Birkin Grif: This land is the ultimate vision of the Ab-real Eternity. Across it, we scuttle like three symbolic beetles without legs.

TRACK FOUR: I REMEMBER CORINTH.

Flitting minutiae on the broad back of the waste, they finally achieve their Heroic goal.

Dr. Grishkin stops.

He and Birkin Grif and the skinless woman stand—at the end of an erratic line of footprints—at the apparent center of an immense, featureless plain: the hub of a massive stasis, a vast silence. The horizon has vanished, there is no obvious convergence of ash and sky: both are flat, monochrome gray. Because of this, environment is shapeless; dimensions are unclear; the three suddenly exist without proper frame of reference, with the sole and inadequate orientation of their own bodies. The effect confuses; they become dream figures on a back-cloth of ab-space: unattached, divested of every vestige of their accepted and appropriate reality.

“It is here we must wait,” says Dr. Grishkin, his fat voice devoid of expression, drained of expression by the single-tone emptiness.

“But He is not here...” begins Birkin Grif, fighting to prevent the visual null from sucking up his very thoughts, speaking precisely only through mammoth effort.

“We must wait,” repeats Grishkin.

“Will He come, though?” demands Grif, thickly, struggling with the silence. “If this is a fool’s errand...” His implied threat falls flat, negated by the vacuum.

“You have lived a fool’s errand for a millennium: why quibble now? Here we wait.” Slow steel in Grishkin’s voice; again he will not be denied. They wait. At this point of minimal orientation, without movement or sound, it seems that eons pass. They wait. Nothing happens for a million years. Finally, Grif speaks, his words harsh and congested with a sudden aged, neurotic ferocity. “I think I may kill you, Dr. Grishkin. He is not coming. All the way to nowhere, and He is not coming. I think I will kill you...” His face is distorted; his good eye winks, manic; this is a senile fury.

“Shut up.” Grishkin is smiling his rosebud parody. “Shut up and look!”

“...I think I will kill you...” hisses Grif, like a machine running down fixedly through a series of programmed spasms. But he looks.

Skinless Lamia is dancing on the ash, magnificently naked once more. Her feet make no sound. She moves to a muted hum of her own making; an insistent, droning raga. She dances possessed, smiling in introspective wonder at her own movement, antithesis of the greater stillness. Her dance is a final destruction of orientation: almost, she floats.

And she is changing.

“Is this not the ultimate in body-schema illusions?” breathes Grishkin. “See: she is living her hallucination!” He is quite overtly touched by the poetry of it all.

Her body elongates...contracts...flows...diminishes. A tail appears, flips archly, disappears. A jeweled dolphin exists whole for an instant, dissolves. The modal hum rises and falls. A golden salamander weaves, sloughs off its skin... becomes a bright proud bird, falters, shimmering at its edges...disembodies reluctantly...

By turns the plastic Lamia is fish, fowl and beast, myth and dream. Then one shape steadies—

And Lamia is no more.

Dr. Grishkin releases his breath in one long sigh of artistic pleasure. Birkin Grif screams.

For on the ash—cinders and dust adhering to its wet membrane—there lies a live human fetus.

It kicks a little, stretching the membrane...

Birkin Grif retches and moans: “O my God...what...?”

Dr. Grishkin is apologetic but unhelpful. “Don’t ask me, Grif mon vieux. I expected a snake. But O what poetry; such a metamorphosis...!” The fetus jerks. Grif whirls on Dr. Grishkin, hysterical, whining like a child.

“Cheat! Liar! This is not what we came here for, this is not it at all, you have cheated...it isn’t fair!”

Coldly, Grishkin, galactic pimp extraordinary, appraises him. His pleasure is quite gone away. His eyes impale the blubbering Grif.

“Fair? You have yet to learn the rules of the game! Fair?” Grif is pinned to the inert landscape by those bleak, oblique eyes. “There is no fairness to inevitability. This was inevitable, Mr. Birkin Grif; inevitable because it has happened. Accept it because of that. Do not look to me for fairness.” He finds the word distasteful. He pauses to gaze speculatively at the drying fetus.

Then: "You expect too much, my friend. You desire: and expect the universe to provide. But that is not the way of things. No indeed." He appears pleased with this summary. Then he frowns suddenly, as if rediscovering an unpleasant reality. "It is a pity you have learned so late. Too late, in point of fact."

And his glittering, malevolent little device is out in a micro-second, a Birkin Grif throws himself frantically forward, horrid realization contorting his features. Thus dies Grif, last of the archetypal sybarites, while the fetus of his skinless lover lies twitching on the ground. He scarcely has time for a second scream.

His enigmatic slayer shrugs and turns to the feebly struggling fetus Gazing, he shakes his hairless head. Such poetry. Reluctantly, he steps on it. For all his sensibility, he has a tidy mind. Casting a last glance at the smoking Birkin Grif—titanium thigh his sole remnant of personality—Dr. Grishkin, the Bringer with the Window, pulls his purple cloak around him and waddles off.

Soon, only his footprints are left on the ash-flats of Wisdom.

TWELVE

Coming from Behind

With his cell in ruins behind him, its surviving members by impaled along the rusty barbed wire perimeter of some Nastic work camp as an example to the labour force of the London Basin shaft projects, Prefontaine fled north. He had with him a worn belstaff-jacket and a machine pistol, some eight or nine hundred rounds of unreliable seven millitmetre ammunition and a terrible emptiness in the softer spaces of his head.

Circumstances had robbed him of his humanity (or so he supposed), but given him in return the priceless energy of despair. He rarely looked over his shoulder; he took no precaution against observation from the air; he invited pursuit. And whenever he thought of the crated components stacked behind him on the bed of the truck, his face worked itself agonizingly into something none of his fellow human beings would have recognized as a smile.

When a blocked air filter held him up in Northhampton, he forced himself out of the truck into a fine grey storm of ash

to clear it, hunching his shoulders against the wind, haunted by the inhabitants of the ruins about him and laughing because he was twenty years too late to do anything for them. When his windscreen ruptured on the derelict motorway at Watford Gap, he set his face against the bitter slipstream and went on. When a child ran into the road on a cold corner by a crumbled hotel in the naked, eroded landscape of the agricultural Midlands, he bit his lip and tried to drive behind it...

But one thin arm flung out before it in horror – mouth wide and lipless, shaped like a segment of orange – it ran back into his path. As he braked, his nearside suspension collapsed, a wall flew madly over his head, a massive impact crumpled the truck, blackness engulfed him.

There were periods of wakefulness, like brief days in a year of twilight. In one of them a priest was bending over him, whispering something.

‘No priest!’ he shouted. ‘No priest!’

Faces gathered around him: big, blind faceted eyes.

‘Mumble, mumble,’ they whispered. ‘Mumble.’

He wept copiously.

‘You leave us alone, we didn’t ask you to come here.’

His leg hurt. He wondered if he’d been betrayed again. He saw his friends draped over the wire, pleading with him.

‘Where’s my truck?’ he asked them. He understood that when you have no more hope, you are invulnerable – you share the insensibility of the dead and the power of the living. In his head, the wind mumbled thick-lipped over the smooth, ageless ruins of the Earth.

‘The ankle is broken, but the ribs are only bruised.’ said Bellman, rubbing at a stain on the hem of his cassock. ‘You were lucky.’

Prefontaine shrugged. He stared round the broken, peeling walls. Sour moisture dripped off the plaster, seeped across the floor and under the bed they had put him in. It smelt like

a lavatory, the smell of Work Camp A, the smell of the whole human half of the world.

‘My truck.’

Bellman smiled. ‘Wrecked, I’m afraid.’ There was a battered reliquary nailed to the wall above the bed. He got to his feet, leant over to the adjust the positions of the figurines, dabbled one finger in the hot wax beneath the candle flame. His wooden crucifix swung from his belt an inch about Prefontaine’s head. He straightened up and studied his fingertip absently. ‘We’ll have to see how you come on,’ he said.

‘What about the child?’

‘Ah, you avoided her. She will come and thank you personally when you are stronger. She is aware that you put yourself at risk to avoid killing her.’

Prefontaine twisted nervously between the rough blankets. ‘I couldn’t help myself. Christ, I wish I’d kept going-! If you knew how valuable that truck is.’ He lay still, exhausted by his anger. Dully: ‘I don’t want any bloody blessings from you, Bellman, so keep your fingers still. Put the candle out.’

Nevertheless, they brought the child in later, dipping its head, shy, dressed in its best clothes. He moved his head away when it tried to kiss his cheek. He held up his hand, palm outwards, and clenched it into a fist.

‘Remember this,’ he said. ‘If I didn’t knock you down, it was so you could remember this-’ Moving his fist gently ‘-and act on it when you’re older. You understand me? You understand what this sign means?’ The child began to cry, ran out of the room.

‘Despair will eat you up,’ said the priest. He stood calmly in that dark damp room and said it. Prefontaine felt his lip curl.

‘The Nastic will eat you up, Bellman. They’ve got their feet on your pathetic neck.’ He rubbed his hand madly across his aching eyes. ‘They smashed my whole group through some bugger like you. He blew my whole cell, *my whole bloody group*, because he didn’t believe in dying.’

He tried to get up, groaned.

'I can't stay here, There might be a unit left up in the Pennines.'

Bellman pressed him back.

'They will be looking for you if you were involved in a revolt. Stay here until it's safe. What can you do like this?'

Prefontaine clenched his hands beneath the blankets.

'Sometimes I find it hard to care,' he said. He slept. The Nastic moved gracefully through his head – insectile, complex, implacable...

...And took him up in a peculiar machine to show him the Earth, raddled like an apple with their great shafts and pits. London, New York, Nogent Le Rotrou, Somali – eight thousand shaftheads with their attendant work camps, scattered meaninglessly across the world – new lava plains, ash cones, the volcanic failures.

'Why are you making us dig holes?' he asked them.

'You are being given a chance to participate in a great cosmic adventure,' they said. 'A corporate endeavour in which your skills, though minor, can play a real part. Your small contribution enables you to participate with joy. Satisfaction in a job well done should be your aim. Every craftsman rejoices, every wheel turns.'

From their factories, vast replicas of themselves, a thousand feet high, had been wheeled – now they were being forced into the completed boreholes at Minsk and Baltimore. In other places, the Nastic took wing, they flew above the pits, emitting high ecstatic musical notes.

'Regretfully, it is part of a design you cannot anticipate,' they explained.

They threw him back down to Work Camp A, the seeping walls, the ruins. His dead comrades surrounded him, open mouthed, empty-eyed.

'The master berates his lazy craftsmen if they are slothful at the wheel. In the autumn field, new smoke rises,' announced

the Nastic. 'Half-complete, the wheel berates its lazy makers – will it not mould itself before them? Do they lack for materials.'

'Betrayed again!' moaned Prefontaine
Resistance was useless.

A week or two passed. Prefontaine eyed the gathering pools of water, the breached walls and the junk on the reliquary shelf with bleak distaste. Bellman's villagers brought him meals he could barely eat; Bellman brought him quiet sympathy he didn't want. In his frequent nightmares the Nastic discovered his wrecked vehicle, came at night, clicking and whispering over its split cargo. Finally, aided by a stick, he was able to leave the cottage.

The shells of buildings; the rank growths of fireweed and deadnettle; the church with its stub of Gothic tower; the ash drifting in from the fields; the Nastic signature on a onesided contract. But he was beyond feeling that sort of pain. A big, awkward figure lurching along the gaunt village street with his belstaff-jacket unfastened and flapping in the wind, he went to inspect the damage.

The truck had fetched up against the wall of the hotel, its roof buckled and torn, its engine rammed back into the cab. Emaciated chickens ran in and out of its burst rear doors; a handful of solemn-eyed children in torn pullovers watched him chase them away. He leant on his stick, breathing heavily.

'None of you ever go in there, do you?' he said to the children. They nodded, shifted their feet. 'I don't want to find any of you in there, ever.' He raised his fist ironically in a salute. 'Good.'

Some of the crates had split on impact: wood shavings and plastic packing had escaped their seams, but their contents were undamaged. He grinned savagely and set about restacking them, wrinkling his nose at the smell of chicken dung. His machine gun lay in the wreck of the cab, but all

his ammunition, including the clip from the weapon itself, had been stolen. Staring speculatively at the children, he fumbled about behind the ruined dashboard until he found the spare magazine taped to the firewall.

Bits of stained glass hung from the lead lattice of the east window; small draughts fluted and hissed through the gaps, and up among the beams of the roof, sparrows huddled, spreading their tail feathers nervously. Prefontaine placed himself by the font and jacked a round into the breach of the machine gun. His fingers were cold.

Bellman, at the altar, said, 'There are searches. If they find live ammunition here-' His voice carried, clear and unruffled.

'I want it back, Bellman. No more betrayals. Find me some transport and the stuff will leave with me.' He tapped the gun on the stone edge of the font.

Bellman turned to face him and began to walk up the aisle, the scrape of his boots echoing round the church. He sat down passively in one of the back pews.

'The only vehicle we have needs attention, perhaps a month's work.' From somewhere under his cassock he produced a piece of rag, blew his nose on it. 'In that time, the entire village will be at risk. Fifty people. You know, it really is the paper handkerchiefs I miss the most.'

'What I have in the back of that van is worth a thousand people. More.'

Bellman rearranged his cassock fussily. 'Supposing the Pennines have already been cleaned out?' he suggested.

'What if you're the last, Prefontaine? Supposing there's nobody left to deliver your atomic bomb to?'

Prefontaine bit the inside of his cheek. He limped quickly along the line of pews and prodded Bellman's neck with the machine-gun muzzle. 'Keep out of the truck,' he muttered fiercely. 'And keep those bloody kids out of it, too.'

The priest chuckled. He rubbed the back of his neck where the gun had made a small circular impression in the flesh.

'You haven't answered my question-'

‘I’m as good as dead already. There’s nothing left to lose. I’m invulnerable.’

‘That wasn’t quite what I meant. Still.’ He shrugged. ‘Very well, then.’

Outside, the children were playing a complicated game among the gravestones. They stopped to watch Bellman and Prefontaine go past, and a small girl detached herself from the rest of the group. Walking alongside Prefontaine, she stared up at him for some moments, then raised one hand, palm outwards, and clenched it into a little, tiny dirty fist.

‘Look at her, Bellman,’ he said. ‘take the hint.’

The priest sighed. ‘If she does that during a Nastic inspection, she will be killed.’ He put his hand on Prefontaine’s arm. ‘As she will be if you are found using the village.’

‘You’ve never in a work camp, have you, Father?’

Prefontaine whispered wearily. ‘When her time comes she’ll wish above everything else that I’d driven the truck over her head that day.’

Hidden behind the larger gravestones, other children opened fire with imaginary weapons, taking careful aim.

It was a peculiar time. Rain had laid the dust. Acrid mists enveloped the destroyed landscape. ‘They are changing the climate,’ said Bellman, ‘perhaps even the atmosphere.’

Small, furtive animals scuttled through the fireweed jungles.

Prefontaine lay on his back in a galvanized iron shed a quarter of a mile out of the village proper, poking up into the enigmatic innards of a vast, rotting Green Line bus. There was nothing fundamentally wrong with it. He unblocked some fuel and air lines, cannibalized some heavy duty hose from his truck, and the work came along quickly. His leg healed.

A disfigured man, unbearably thin and tall, wandered into the village from the south. His face was eaten away round the lips and chin, his skin was like corroded aluminium. He

stayed for a week, stumbling about, trying to talk to the villagers. They fed him (a stock response, a reflex accomplished without rancour or sympathy.) Prefontaine avoided him, but he came to the door of the cottage one night and stood there looking in.

‘Thregh sat caught,’ he said, screwing up his eyes against the light. ‘Oh ech helth stat, toogh tray: loch ech tray.’

‘I don’t understand you.’

He became animated, waving his arms disconnectedly. He was so tall he hit his head on the lintel staggering in. His face was all intimations of skull: mad, awful, nothing to do with the human race at all. He touched the rubbish on the reliquary shelf.

‘Nieshkol, Cargle geth!’

He followed Prefontaine from room to room, saying these inescapable, meaningless things. He was wearing a long burlap garment covered with filth. Gazing wildly at Prefontaine, he bent down and took hold of it, pulled it up to his neck. His legs were made of metal, bare and spidery. They had too many joints and appeared to be grafted directly on to the bottom of his rib cage.

He tapped them with his fingernails, producing a hollow, musical sound. ‘Geth!’ he shouted. Then he quietened down and went aimlessly off up the street, bumping into things.

‘He suffers a great deal of pain,’ said Bellman. ‘The Nastic took him as a child.’

‘What for?’

‘An experiment, a punishment, a game?’ The priest raised his hands, palms upwards. ‘He doesn’t know. When they lost interest in him, he became a nomad. He comes through here once or twice a year. He was trying to tell you about a vision. He believes himself to be a prophet or harbinger of some kind. There but for the grace-’

‘Don’t say it.’ Prefontaine, seeing visions of his own, shuddered. He stayed in the cottage feeding his anger until

the man had left the village, rolling and tottering away north, attempting to control his strange and useless limbs.

He finished his work on the bus: its engine grunted sourly, fired and caught, filled the shed with noise and fumes. He sat grinning behind the big horizontal steering wheel, opening and closing the pneumatic doors, switching the indicators on and off.

'Have your tickets ready please!'

Bellman helped him transfer the stuff from the wrecked truck. They moved it in small loads on a makeshift handcart. Bicycle wheels creaking through the village in the twilight. Prefontaine had discarded his stick and now wore the machine pistol slung around his neck from its strap like a guitar. They were an odd pair, bent over the shafts of the cart, shoving it between the silent houses.

'I can feel them behind me, Bellman.' Prefontaine waved an arm at the fog drifting in over the stripped fields. *'They're getting closer all the time. They must know I escaped the net by now.'* He touched the machine gun. *'I'm ready for the bastards.'*

'Are you?'

The fog moved in slow gelid streams on the back of a rising wind. They stood in the doorway of the shed, resting before they went to fetch the final load, the walls of the place flexing and creaking around them. Prefontaine bared his teeth. The pockets of his belstaff were stuffed with spare cartridges; he took out two or three of them and rattled them in the palm of his hand.

'Yes.'

'What will you do if there's no one left in the Pennines?'

'Put the sodding back together myself. Drive it down their throats in that good old bus of yours and let it off.'

'And the reprisals?'

'I'm not a human being anymore. I'm a weapon.'

They trudged through ragged, dissolving banks of mist with the empty cart. Prefontaine clambered about in the back of the ruined truck, passing crates out to the priest. They worked silently for a few minutes, then:

“God Almighty,” said Bellman softly. He stared up into the darkening sky, he shook his head from side to side; he hoisted the skirts of his cassock and scrambled into the truck on his hands and knees. ‘Keep quite still,’ he advised, grasping his crucifix. Prefontaine pushed past him and stuck his head out. Drifting over the eroded landscape to the south, like a bloated stupid face seen in the vacuum of a dream, came a Nastic patrol vessel.

‘Get back in, get back in,’ muttered Bellman. ‘They haven’t seen us yet.’

Product of some demented organic engineering process, it was a huge eccentric spheroid, mottled and lumpy, a vast rotten grapefruit crawling with mould. In places, its hull was translucent, vague fluorescences coming and going behind it.

Venting great gusts of foul-smelling gas, it hung precariously three hundred feet above the village, moaning like a crushed animal.

‘Come on, you sods,’ invited Prefontaine, thinking of the barbed wire, the empty eyes, the nightmares of Work Camp A. He settled his elbows firmly and comfortably on the bed of the truck. He put the stock of the machine pistol to his shoulder and picked out his spot-

Coming up from behind, Bellman hit him in the biceps with stiffened fingers like bits of iron. His arms went numb and he dropped the machine gun. ‘Get off me, you bloody moron!’ Bellman grabbed him by the collar of the belstaff jacket and dragged him back into the truck. He brought his mouth up close to Prefontaine’s ear and hissed: ‘What can you do with that little thing? Do you want the whole place wiped out? You couldn’t *scratch* it with that-’

Prefontaine squirmed about, kicked out. 'Whose side are you on, Bellman?' His boot hit something soft and Bellman let him go. 'Whose bloody side are you on?'

'I'm sorry,' said Bellman, 'but you had no chance.'

Slumped among the crates, they stared sullenly at one another, dishevelled and panting, listening to the moans of the queer machine above. Prefontaine rubbed his arms.

'How long will it stay?'

'It depends. Not long, if they don't suspect you're here.'

Bellman smiled wanly, fingering a bruise on his cheek. 'I should seriously consider whose side *you* are on,' he said.

This gnomic statement kept Prefontaine occupied all through the chilly night. He held tight to his gun, eyeing the priest insecurely while the Nastic vessel floated beneath the cloud-base like an unreasonable moon. Bellman shivered and blew into his cupped hands. Neither of them spoke. An hour before dawn, the machine relinquished its position above the village; made a wide circuit of the surrounding area, issuing unpleasant steam; then wobbled erratically off south, rising slowly until it vanished into the dirty sky.

Shivering and stiff, they emerged from the wrecked truck. 'I hope you feel safer now,' said Prefontaine as unkindly as he could. He slung the machine gun round his neck and, despite the pain in his ribs, refused to let the priest help him finish loading the cart.

Dawn, then: Prefontaine rolling north again, with the bomb safely stowed and his motives uncomplicated. Half a mile out of the village, a thick mist enveloped the coach. Streams of icy vapour invaded the driving position. He was bleary-eyed and tired. With visibility down to four or five yards and the headlights blazing out uselessly, he kept his speed a little above walking pace, determined to have no repetition of the incident with the child.

A tall thin figure assembled itself out of the mist at the side of the road, waving its arms; the disfigured man, his alien

legs protruding at odd angles through the threadbare sacking of his coat. Prefontaine stopped, reversed.

‘You haven’t got very far, then. Neither of us seem to be making much headway.’

He stood for a minute by the doors, staring up at Prefontaine, his lipless mouth wet.

‘Lagth,’ he said. He stumbled into the bus, failed to come to terms with his legs, fell into one of the passenger seats. The wind knocked out of him, he lay there silently, looking at the roof. Dissociated components of the landscape swam past the windows – a skein of rusty wire netting, fence posts covered with fungus, a ditch. The coach groaned on in first gear.

‘We might as well be on bloody foot,’ said Prefontaine, squinting impatiently out into the fog. The disfigured man came up behind him, gripped the back of his seat.

‘What is it?’

‘Geeh och na golt, toch. Loch tray.’ His eyes were wide, anguished, unfocused. Air whistled past the edges of exposed nasal cavity.

‘Don’t bother me now. Why not sit down?’ The wreckage of some kind of military vehicle loomed up out of the fog, rotting down to nothing at the crown of the road. Prefontaine winced.

‘Just sit down.’

‘Geeh och loch tray! Loch tray! Golk!’ The disfigured man’s agitation mounted. He stared hard at Prefontaine, waving one arm. The bus rocked and bumped over a series of ramps and potholes; he lost his balance, clutched at Prefontaine’s neck. ‘Caulk thart nitch!’

Prefontaine choked, struck out. ‘Let go-’ He lost grip on the steering wheel.

Ponderously, the coach left the road; slowing, rumbled over the grass verge and tipped clumsily over into the ditch. Its offside wheels reared into the air. The engine stalled.

Prefontaine fell out of his sea, the disfigured prophet came

down heavily on top of him, shouting. 'Not gut! Theogh!' Prefontaine eluded his flailing arms, rapped him in the larynx with the heel of his hand. His awful head jerked back, his eyes rolled.

Prefontaine crawled out of the coach, stood scratching his head at the mess. He kicked miserably at the dented bodywork, faced with the long walk back to the village for help. He went to fetch his machine gun. The disfigured man had propped himself up against the steering column like a rag doll in a biscuit box, his legs twitching impotently. He gazed steadily at Prefontaine. His left eye was closing up. 'You, he said quite clearly. 'You kill us all.' He sighed. 'You're a sodding madman, you know that?' said Prefontaine. 'That's what you are.' And he trudged off.

The outskirts of the village were damp and eerie in the thinning fog. He stood in the road, his ankle aching ferociously, and listened to the houses. Water dripped from a fractured gutter, fanning out over the wall beneath; doors hung open. He walked down the main street, looking in through the windows; but no one was there. They might have all left a decade before, on some vain migration into the dustbowls of the east.

Silence drove him off the road and into the fireweed jungles behind the cottages. His composure hung by a thread. Among the weeds, a cat with a cankered face was stalking some small, invisible thing. The metal of the machine gun was beaded with condensation, his hands slipped as he took the safety off.

Click.

The cat shot out of some nettles, looking back over its shoulder. It sat down, eyeing him resentfully.

He travelled the entire length of the village without meeting anybody. From the garden of the last house, he could just see his truck, leaning up against the wall of the hotel. He thought he detected a movement there. He became aware of

an undercurrent of sound, a vague oppression of the ears. Visibility was increasing steadily. He rubbed his hand over his face, imagined suddenly that he was being observed.

He got down on to his elbows and knees and crawled into the cottage; moved the rotting curtain away from the front window. It fell to pieces under his fingers.

A score of old men and women were lined up in front of the hotel, their faces placid and bucolic, their hands wrapped in bundles of rag against the cold. A shifted foot, a cough – the carved chest of age, the puckered mouth. A few children sidled about near them – rickety, shivering, bored and uncomprehending. In apathetic silence, they stared ahead. The human sector, with its sore eyes and withered forearms.

Prefontaine rested his head on the window pane. He felt divorced, objective; but his knuckles were white on the gun.

Sagging like a perished rubber ball on the tarmac some twenty yards from the villagers: the Nastic patrol vessel. Its inner lights were dim, but the rot still crept over its rind, and thin wisps of vapour escaped its folds and orifices. A filthy smell issued from it.

He broke from the window, he brought up the gun.

‘This is the price tag on your bomb, Prefontaine.’ said Bellman irritably from the gloom behind him. ‘Why did you come back?’

Prefontaine narrowed his eyes. He didn’t know what to say. ‘I needed help. The bus-’

Bellman laughed gently, shook his head.

‘You know, I thought for a moment...The Nastic assume we are still hiding you. I have twenty minutes left in which to produce you, but I suspect they’ll take the reprisals even if I do. And if you fire that thing, the people out there will certainly die.’

Prefontaine let the gun dangle from its strap. He chewed his thumbnail.

‘Don’t you think I feel some pain?’

'You're the invulnerable one.' Bellman moved to the window, fiddled with the edges of the broken pane. 'You have nothing to lose.' He worked a long sliver of glass free of the window frame, inspected it judiciously. He swung round to face Prefontaine.

'Others do the losing for you.'

He dropped the glass and stepped on it, turned away again. Prefontaine shrugged.

'I won't give up the bomb.'

'Ah-' A sudden tension revealed itself in the muscles of Bellman's neck. His skin was like oiled paper stretched over a lamp. 'Supposing-' He stared across at the Nastic vehicle. 'Supposing I promise to do my best to deliver the weapon?' He folded his arms. 'It's you they want. They know nothing about an atom bomb. They didn't even bother with the truck.'

'That's speculation. You can't be sure of that.'

Distantly: 'Look out there. Those are the people you would claim to be fighting for. It's a chance for them,'

'It's their freedom I'm interested in-'

'-Not their lives?'

Prefontaine understood that the Nastic had robbed him of nothing. The priest was regarding him with a certain amount of satisfaction. Outside, the hostages had nothing to watch but their feet. 'You Jesuit bastard,' he whispered, His face worked itself into a desperate approximation of a smile. 'I don't want any bloody blessings from you,' he warned. He reached out quickly, ripped Bellman's crucifix off, flung it into a corner. 'So stuff that.'

Without the machine gun, there was nothing left to do with his hands. He stuck them into the pockets of his belstaff-jacket. The mist was breaking up, blowing about on an icy wind; the wet road gleamed before him. When he left the shelter of the cottage doorway, his hair blew into his face.

Slowly, he walked towards the Nastic vessel, trying not to look at the human half of the world.

The Nastic emerged to welcome him, forcing themselves through flexible orifices in the hull of the ship. They stropped their great bent rear legs together, humming.

‘The rebellious son returns, the father rejoices: all is calm, all is bright,’ they said, peeling back their hard grey wing cases. Their faceted eyes glittered.

‘When young shoots sprout it can clearly be seen where the snow has thawed.’ They began to jump insanely back and forth over their peculiar machine, spinning high into the air, whistling and clicking. ‘Does the master not welcome his erring apprentice?’ they demanded shrilly.

‘Leave these people alone!’ called Prefontaine. ‘It’s me you want.’

They settled in front of the vehicle, refolded their wings; they faced him, mandibles snapping energetically, gristly membranes flexing. He began to shake all over. The backs of his thighs were wet. ‘Deceit pains the father, remorse overcomes the child. Oh oh oh.’

Fluid leaked from their joints. A sphincter formed in the rind of the ship; they fell back, indicating that he should enter.

He fought to keep from vomiting. He stumbled, moaned. He wanted to run.

‘Get down on the floor!’ called a clear, urgent voice from behind him. He stood there, staring about stupidly.

Something fizzed over his head. He fell on his face. The Nastic vessel gave a huge hollow grunt and split open like a putrid melon. Vast jets of disgusting fluid spewed out of it; bits of rind were flung into the sky, spinning; brown gases bubbled out of the collapsed sphere. Prefontaine whimpered, gagged, clasped his hands over the backs of his head.

The front doors of the hotel swung inwards, the hostages rushed inside. An automatic rifle began to operate from an upper window, clattering and tearing holes in the road off to Prefontaine’s left. He writhed away, eyes streaming.

They came running in from the quiet houses, the acrid fields, the fireweed jungles – men, women and children, people he had never even seen in the village – their faces grim, their guns black and oily, their lips peeled back off their teeth. The Nastic were picked up by a storm of small-arms fire and blown twitching through the fumes like dried locusts, crying ‘Oh! Oh! Oh!’ in distant, reedy voices.

Prefontaine, crawling back to the safety of the cottage, brought up the contents of his stomach. With this raw bile came all the pain he had kept locked into the back of his skull: Work Camp A, the wire, the dead men – the stink and squalor of the Nastic process – the subordination of the Earth. Oh, he fought it, lying there with the reek of the ruptured vessel drifting over his head: he tried to force it down, to retain his despair, his invincibility. But when it was over, he was able to kneel on the tarmac and weep like a human being.

He was sitting on the doorstep rubbing his eyes when Bellman appeared out of the ruin, carrying a three-inch rocket launcher over his shoulder.

‘Thanks for nothing,’ he said, bitterly. ‘Did I deserve that?’

Bellman smiled. He put the rocket launcher down, dusted his cassock.

‘Let’s go and fetch that bomb,’ he said. ‘Welcome back to the human race.’

‘I couldn’t bloody help myself.’

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